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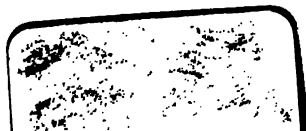
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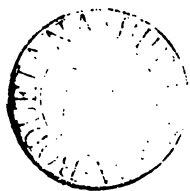




THE FINGER OF FATE.

A Romance.

BY
CAPTAIN MAYNE REID.



IN TWO VOLUMES.
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CONTENTS.

CHAPTER I.

	PAGE
THE HALF-BROTHERS	1

CHAPTER II.

DOGGY DICK	13
----------------------	----

CHAPTER III.

THE ARCHERY FÊTE	26
----------------------------	----

CHAPTER IV.

A COQUETTE	33
----------------------	----

CHAPTER V.

TWO STRINGS TO THE BOW	40
----------------------------------	----

CHAPTER VI.

THE GATHERING CLOUD	46
-------------------------------	----

CHAPTER VII.	
	PAGE
PLOTTERS FOR FORTUNE	53
CHAPTER VIII.	
FATHER AND SON	61
CHAPTER IX.	
THE CHECKMATE	72
CHAPTER X.	
THE BAIT TAKEN	82
CHAPTER XI.	
AWAITING THE PROPOSAL	91
CHAPTER XII.	
SELF-EXILED	104
CHAPTER XIII.	
LONDON THUGS	113
CHAPTER XIV.	
TURNED ARTIST	126
CHAPTER XV.	
A SKETCHER SURPRISED	132

Contents.

vii

CHAPTER XVI.	
	PAGE
EMPTY POCKETS	141
CHAPTER XVII.	
AN UNLUCKY RECOGNITION	148
CHAPTER XVIII.	
A SYMPATHISER	159
CHAPTER XIX.	
ON THE MARCH	169
CHAPTER XX.	
WRITING TO DICTATION	178
CHAPTER XXI.	
UNDER THE CEDAR	190
CHAPTER XXII.	
A QUEER TRAVELLER	198
CHAPTER XXIII.	
DISSIMULATION	206
CHAPTER XXIV.	
A STRANGE VISITOR	212

CHAPTER XXV.	
AN UNCOURTEOUS RECEPTION	PAGE 217
CHAPTER XXVI.	
AN UNCEREMONIOUS DISMISSAL	225
CHAPTER XXVII.	
BRIGAND DOMESTIC LIFE	232
CHAPTER XXVIII.	
UNPLEASANT INFORMATION	240
CHAPTER XXIX.	
PAINFUL CONJECTURING	248
CHAPTER XXX.	
BRIGANDAGE AND ITS CAUSE	254
CHAPTER XXXI.	
THE TORREANIS	264
CHAPTER XXXII.	
CAPTAIN COUNT GUARDIOLI	272
CHAPTER XXXIII.	
IMPROVED PRISON FARE	280

THE FINGER OF FATE.

CHAPTER I.

THE HALF-BROTHERS.

2 IN a wood, within ten miles of Windsor, two youths are seen, gun in hand, in pursuit of game. A brace of thoroughbred setters, guarding the cover in front, and a well-equipped keeper, walking obsequiously in the rear, precludes any suspicion of poaching; though the personal appearance of the young sportsmen needs no such testimony.

The wood is only an extensive pheasant-cover, and their father is its owner. They are the sons of General Harding, an old Indian officer, who, with a hundred thousand pounds, garnered during twenty years' active service

in the East, has purchased an estate in the pleasant shire of Bucks, in the hope of restoring health to a constitution impaired upon the hot plains of Hindostan.

A fine old Elizabethan mansion, of red brick, now and then visible through the openings of the cover, tells that the General has laid out his lacs with considerable taste, while five hundred acres of finely timbered park, a "home farm," and half-a-dozen others rented out—to say nothing of the wood-covers and cottage tenements—prove that the *ci-devant* soldier has not carefully collected a hundred thousand pounds in India to be carelessly squandered in England.

The two young sportsmen, already introduced as his sons, are his only sons; in short, the only members of his family, with the exception of a maiden sister, who, being sixty years old, and otherwise extremely uninteresting, will not figure conspicuously in our tale, however true it is.

Looking at the two youths, as they step

through the pheasant-cover, you perceive there is but slight difference in their size; there is in their age, and still more in their personal appearance. Both are what is termed *dark*; but there is a difference in the degree. He who is the elder, and who bears the baptismal name Nigel, has a complexion almost olive, with straight black hair, that under the sunlight exhibits a purplish iridescence.

Henry, the younger, with fair skin and ruddier cheek, has hair of an auburn brown, drooping down his neck like clusters of Spanish chestnuts.

So great is their dissimilarity in personal appearance, that a stranger would scarce believe the two young sportsmen to be brothers.

Nor are they so in the exact signification of the word. Both can call General Harding father; but if the word "mother" be mentioned, their thoughts would go to two different personages, neither any longer on the earth. Nigel's should stray back to Hyderabad, to a tomb in the environs of that ancient

Indian city; Henry's to a grave of later date, in the quiet precinct of an English country churchyard.

The explanation is easy. General Harding is not the only man, soldier or civilian, who has twice submitted his neck to the matrimonial yoke, though few ever wedded two wives so different in character as were his. Physically, mentally, morally, the Hindoo lady of Hyderabad was as unlike her Saxon successor as India is to England.

Looking at Nigel Harding and his half-brother, Henry, one could not help perceiving that the dissimilarity had in both cases been transmitted from mother to son, without any great distraction caused by the blood of a common father. An incident, occurring in the cover, gives evidence of this.

Though especially a pheasant preserve, the young sportsmen are not in pursuit of the bird with strong whirring wings. The setters search for smaller game. It is mid-winter. A week ago the youths might have been seen,

capped and gowned, loitering along the aisles of Oriel College, Oxford. Now home for the holidays, what better than beating the home-covers? The frost-bound earth forbids indulgence in the grand chase; but it gives rare sport by driving the snipes and woodcocks—both migratory birds among the Chilterns—to the open waters of the running rivulet.

Up the banks of one—a brook that, defying the frost, gurgles musically among the trees—the young sportsmen are directing their search. This, with the setters, tells that woodcock is their game. There are two dogs, a white and a black, both of good breed, but not equally well trained. The black sets steady as a rock; the white quarters more wildly, runs rash, and has twice *flushed* the game, without *setting* it.

The white dog belongs to Nigel; the black to his half-brother.

A third time the setter shows his imperfect training, by flushing a cock before the sportsmen are nigh enough to obtain a fair shot.

The blood sprung from Hyderabad can stand

it no longer. It is hot even under the shadows of a winter wood in the Chilterns.

"I'll teach the cur a lesson!" cries Nigel, leaning his gun against a tree, and taking a clasp-knife out of his pocket. "What you should have taught him long ago, Doggy Dick, if you'd half done your duty."

"Lor, Muster Nigel," replies the game-keeper, to whom the apostrophe has been addressed, "I've whipped the animal till my arms ached. 'Tain't no use. The steady ain't in him."

"I'll put it into him, then!" cries the young Anglo-Indian, striding, knife in hand, towards the spaniel. "See if I don't!"

"Stay, Nigel!" interposed Henry. "You are surely not going to do the dog an injury?"

"And what is it to you, if I am? He is *mine*—not *yours*."

"Only, that I should think it very cruel of you. The fault may not be his, poor dumb brute. As you say, it may be Dick who is to blame, for not properly training him."

"Thank'ee, Muster Henry! 'Bleeged to ye for yer compliment. In coorse it be all my doin'; tho' not much thanks for doin' my best. Howsoever, I'm obleeged to ye, Muster Henry."

Doggy Dick, who, though young, is neither graceful nor good-looking, accompanies his rejoinder with a glance that bespeaks a mind still more ungraceful than his person.

"Bother your talk—both!" vociferates the impatient Nigel. "I'm going to chastise the cur as he deserves, and not as you may like it, Master Hal. I want a twig for him."

The twig, when cut from its parent stem, turns out to be a stick, three-quarters of an inch in diameter.

With this the peccant animal is brutally belaboured, till the woods for a mile around re-echo its howlings.

Henry begs his brother to desist.

In vain. Nigel continues the cudgelling.

"Gi'e it him!" cries the unfeeling keeper.

"Do the beggar good."

"You, Dick," interposes Henry, "I shall report you to my father."

An angry exclamation from the half-brother, and a sullen scowl from the savage in gaiters, is the only notice taken of Henry's threat. Nigel, irritated by it, only strikes more spitefully.

"Shame, Nigel! Shame! You've beaten the poor brute enough—more than enough. Have done!"

"Not till I've given him a mark to remember me!"

"What are you going to do to him? What more?" hurriedly asks Henry, seeing that Nigel has flung away the stick, and stands threateningly with his knife. "Surely you don't intend——"

"To split his ear! That is what I intend doing!"

"For shame! You shall not!"

"Shall not? But I shall, and will!"

"You shall split my hand first!" cries the humane youth, flinging himself on his knees,

and with both hands covering the head of the setter.

“Hands off, Henry! The dog is my own; I shall do what I please to him. Hands off, I say!”

“I won’t!”

“Then take the consequences.”

With his left hand Nigel clutches at the animal’s ear, at the same time lunging out recklessly with the knife blade. Blood spurts up into the faces of both, and falls in crimson spray over the flax-like coat of the setter.

It is not the blood of Nigel’s dog, but his brother’s—the little finger of whose left hand shows a deep, longitudinal cut traversing all the way from knuckle to nail.

“You see what you’ve got by your interference!” cries Nigel, without the slightest show of regret. “Next time you’ll keep your claws out of harm’s way.”

The unfeeling observation, more than the hurt received, at length stirs the Saxon blood of the younger brother.

"Coward!" he cries. "Throw your knife away, and stand up. Though you *are* three years older than I, I don't fear you. You shall pay for this."

Nigel, maddened by the challenge from one whom he has hitherto controlled, drops the knife; and the half-brothers close in a fisticuff, fight with anger as intense as if no kindred blood ran in their veins.

As already stated, there is but slight difference in their size. Nigel the taller, Henry of stouter build. But in this sort of encounter the Saxon sinews soon show their superiority over the more flaccid frame of the Anglo-Indian; and in ten minutes' time the latter appears but too well pleased, when the keeper interferes to prevent his further punishment. Had it gone the other way, Doggy Dick would have allowed the combat to continue.

There is no thought of further sport. For that day, the woodcocks are permitted to remain undisturbed in their shrubby cover.

Henry, binding up his wounded hand in a

kerchief, strides direct homewards, followed by the black setter. Nigel stalks moodily behind, with Doggy Dick by his side, and the blood-besprinkled animal skulking cowed-like at his heels.

General Harding is astonished at the early return of the sportsmen. Is the stream frozen up, and the woodcocks gone to more open quarters?

The blood-stained kerchief comes under his eye, and the split finger requires explanation. So, too, a purple ring around the eye of his eldest born. The truth has to be told, each giving his version.

The younger brother is at a disadvantage: for the testimony is two to one—the keeper declaring against him. For all that, truth triumphs in the mind of the astute old soldier, and although both his sons are severely reprimanded, Nigel receives the heavier share of the censure.

It is a sad day's sport for all—the black setter alone excepted.

For Doggy Dick does not escape unscathed. Ere parting from the presence of the General, the licence is taken from his pocket; the velveteen shooting jacket stripped from his shoulders; and he receives his discharge, with a caution never to show himself again in the Beechwood preserves, under the penalty of being treated as a poacher.

CHAPTER II.

DOGGY DICK.

DOGGY DICK, on being discharged by General Harding, in a short time succeeded in obtaining another and similar situation. It was on an estate bordering that of the General, whose cover came within a field or two of meeting with those of his neighbour. This gentleman was a city magnate, by name Whibley, who, having accumulated a fortune by sharp trading on the Stock Exchange, had purchased the estate in question, and commenced playing squire on an extensive scale.

Between the old officer and the newcomer there was no cordiality ; on the contrary, some coolness. General Harding had an instinctive contempt for the vulgar ostentation usually

exhibited by these social upstarts, who must needs ride to the parish church in a carriage and pair, though their residence be but three hundred yards from the churchyard gate. Of this class was the gentleman in question.

In addition to the dissimilarity of tastes between a retired officer and a retired stock-broker, a dispute had early occurred between them, about rights of game belonging to a strip of waste that stretched triangularly between their respective properties.

It was a trifling affair, but well calculated to increase their mutual coolness; which at length ended in a hostility—silent, but understood. To this, perhaps, more than any professional merit, was Doggy Dick indebted for his promotion to be head keeper of the Whibley preserves; just the course which a *parvenu* would take for the satisfaction of his spite.

On that same year, when the shooting season came round, the young Hardings discovered a scarcity of game in their father's preserves. The General did not often go gunning himself,

and would not have noticed this falling off; neither, perhaps, would Nigel; but Henry, who was passionately fond of field sports, at once perceived that there was a thinner stock of pheasants than on the preceding season. All the more surprising to him, because it was a good year for game generally, and pheasants in particular. The Whibley covers were swarming with them; and they were reported plentiful in the country around.

It became a question whether General Harding's gamekeeper had properly attended to his trust. No poaching had been reported, except some trifling cases of boys, who had been detected stealing eggs in the hatching season. But this had not occurred on a scale sufficient to account for the scarcity of the game.

Besides, the new gamekeeper, who was reported one of the best, had been provided with a full set of watchers; and, on the Whibley side, there was a staff not so strong, with Doggy Dick at their head.

While reflecting on this, it occurred to Mr.

Henry Harding that something might have been done to attract the pheasants across to the Whibley covers. Perhaps a better lay of feed had been there provided for them?

He knew that neither Doggy Dick nor his master owed any good-will towards him or his father; and a trick of this kind would be compatible with the character of the stockbroker.

Still, there was nothing in it beyond a certain discourtesy; and it only made it necessary that some steps should be taken to create a counter attraction for the game. Patches of buck wheat were sown here and there, and other favourite pheasant's food was liberally laid through the covers.

On the following season the result was the same, or worse—the strong, whirring wing was sparingly heard among the Harding preserves. Even partridges had become scarce in the Swedes and stubble; while on the Whibley property both were in abundance.

The General's gamekeeper, when taken to task, admitted that, during the breeding season,

he had found several pheasants' nests rifled of their eggs. He could not account for it. There was no one ever seen in the covers, except occasionally the keepers from the neighbouring estate. But of course *they* would not do such a thing as steal eggs.

"Indeed," thought Henry Harding, "I'm not so sure of that. On the contrary, it appears to be the only way to account for our scarcity of game."

He communicated these thoughts to his father; and Whibley's keepers were forbidden the range. It was deemed discourteous, and widened the breach between the *ci-devant* soldier and the retired stockbroker.

Another breeding season came round, and the young Hardings were at home for the Easter holidays. It was at this time of the year that the chief damage appeared to have been done to the game on the estate.

No amount of winter poaching can cause such havoc in a preserve, as that arising from the destruction, or abstraction, of the eggs. A

farmer's boy may do greater damage in one day than the most incorrigible gang of poachers in a month, with all their nets, traps, guns, and other appliances to boot.

Knowing this, the Harding covers were this year still more carefully watched—additional men being employed. A goodly number of nests was noted, and a better produce expected.

But although the future seemed fair, Henry Harding was not satisfied with the past. He chafed at his disappointment on the two preceding seasons, and was determined on discovering the cause. For this purpose he adopted an expedient.

On a certain day a holiday was given to the keepers on the Harding estate, which included the watchers as well. It was fixed for the date of some races, held about ten miles off. The General's drag was granted for taking them to the race-course. The holiday was promised a week in advance ; so that the fact might become known to the keepers of the adjoining estate.

The race day came ; the drag rattled off, loaded with half a score of men in coats of velveteen. They were the keepers and watchers. For that day the Harding preserves were left to take care of themselves—a fine opportunity for poachers.


So a stranger might have thought, but not Henry Harding. Just before the drag drove off, he was seen to enter the covers, carrying a Malacca cane, and take his way towards their farther side, where they were bounded by the estate of the stockbroker. He walked quietly, almost stealthily, through the copses. A poacher could not have proceeded with greater caution. Between the two preserves there was a strip of common land—the waste already alluded to as having caused contention. Near its edge stood an ancient elm, swathed in ivy. In its first fork, amidst the green festoons, Henry Harding ensconced himself; took a cigar out of his case; lit it; and commenced smoking.

The position he had chosen was excellent for his purpose. On one side it commanded

a view of the waste. No one could cross from Whibley to Harding without being seen. On the other, it overlooked a broad expanse of the Harding covers—known to be a favourite haunt of pheasants, and one of their noted places of nesting.

The watcher kept his perch for a considerable time, without discovering anything to reward him for his vigilance. He smoked one cigar, then another, and was half way through the third. His patience was becoming exhausted, to say nothing of the irksomeness of his seat on the corrugated elm. He began to think that his suspicions—hitherto directed against Doggy Dick—were without foundation. He even reasoned about their injustice. After all, Doggy might not be so bad as he had deemed him.

Speak of the fiend, and he is near; think of him, and he is not far off. So was it in the case of Doggy Dick. As the stump of Henry's third cigar was burnt within an inch of his teeth, Whibley's head keeper hove in sight.



He was first seen standing on the edge of the Whibley cover, his ill-favoured face protruding stealthily through a screen of "witheys." In this position he stood for some time, reconnoitring the ground. Then, stepping out, silent and cat-like, he made his way across the neutral territory, and plunged into the Harding preserves.

Henry scanned him with the eye of a lynx, or detective. There was now the prospect of something to reward him for his long watching, and the strain of sitting upon the elm.

As was expected, Doggy took his way across the open expanse, where several nests had been "noted." He still kept to his cat-like tread—crouching, and now and then looking suspiciously around him.

This did not hinder him from flushing a pheasant. One rose with a sonorous whirr; while another went fluttering along the sward as if both its wings had been broken.

The hen looked as if Doggy might have covered her with his hat, or killed her with a

stick. He did not attempt to do either; but, bending over the forsaken nest, he took out the eggs, and carefully deposited them in his game-bag!

Out of the same bag he took something, which Henry saw him scatter over the ground in the neighbourhood of the nest. This done, he walked on in search of another.

"Come," thought Henry, "one brood is enough to be sacrificed in this sort of way—enough for my purpose."

Throwing away the stump of his cigar, he dropped down from the tree, and rushed after the nest-robber.

Doggy saw him, and attempted to escape to the Whibley covers. But before he could cross the fence, the fingers of his pursuer were tightly clutched upon the collar of his velveteen coat; and he came to the ground, crushing the eggs within his game-bag. This being turned inside out, the spilt yolks and shattered shells gave proof of the plunder he had committed.

Henry Harding was at this time a strapping youth, with strength and spirit inherited from his soldier father. Moreover, he was acting with right on his side.

The keeper had neither his weight nor his inches, and was further enfeebled by his sense of wrong-doing. Under these circumstances, he saw the absurdity of making resistance. He made none ; but permitted the irate youth to cudgel him with the Malacca cane until every bone in his body seemed about to be shattered like the egg-shells late carried in his game-bag.

“Now, you thief!” cried young Harding, when his passion was nearly spent. “You can go back to Mr. Whibley’s covers, and hatch whatever plot may suit you and your snob of a master, but no more of my pheasants’ eggs.”

Doggy did not dare to make reply, lest it should tempt a fresh application of the cudgel. Clambering over the fence, he hobbled back across the common, and hid him-

self among the hazels of the Whibley preserves.

Turning towards the plundered nest, Henry Harding examined the ground in its proximity. He discovered a scattering of buckwheat, that had been steeped in some sweet-smelling liquid. It was the same he had seen Doggy distribute over the sward.

He collected a quantity in his kerchief, and carried it home. On analysis it proved to be poison !

Though there was no trial instituted, the story, with all its details, soon became known in the neighbourhood. Doggy Dick knew better than to bring an action for assault ; and the Hardings were satisfied with the punishment that had been already administered to their disgraced keeper.

As for the retired stock-broker, he had no alternative but discharge his ill-conditioned servant, who from that time became notorious as the most adroit poacher in the parish.

The submissiveness with which he had re-

ceived the castigation administered by Henry Harding seemed afterwards to have been a source of regret to him: for in future encounters of a similar kind he proved himself a desperate and dangerous assailant—so dangerous that, in a conflict with one of General Harding's watchers, occurring about a year from that time, he inflicted a severe wound upon the man, resulting in his death. He saved his own neck from the halter by making his escape out of the country; and though traced to Boulogne, and thence to Marseilles—in the company of some jockeys who were taking English horses to Italy—he finally eluded justice by hiding himself in some corner of that classic land, then covered by a network of petty states; most of them not only obstructive to justice, but corrupt in their administration.

CHAPTER III.

THE ARCHERY FETE.

THREE years had elapsed, and the half brothers were again home from college. They had both passed beyond the boundaries of boyhood. Nigel was of age, and Henry full grown.

Nigel had become noted for sedateness of conduct, economy in expenditure, and close application to his studies.

Henry, on the other hand, had won a very different character. If not considered an absolute scapegrace, he was looked upon as a young gentleman of somewhat loose habits,—hating books, loving all sorts of jollity, and scorning economy, as if, instead of a virtue, it were the curse of life.

In reality, Nigel was only restrained by an astute, secretive, and selfish nature; while Henry, with a heart of more generous inclinations, gave way to the seductions of pleasure, with a freedom that would be tempered by time. The General, however satisfied with the conduct of his elder son, was not pleased with the proclivities of the younger; more especially as his heart, like Jacob's, had a yearning for his last born.

Although struggling against any preference, he could not help thinking at times, how much happier it would have made him if Henry would but imitate the conduct of Nigel—even though their *rôles* should be reversed! But it seemed as if this desire was not to be gratified. During their sojourn within college walls, the rumours of *diableries*, of which his younger son had been the hero, were scarce compensated by the reports of scholastic triumphs on the part of the elder.

It is true that Nigel himself had been habitually the herald to proclaim these mingled

insinuations and successes, for Henry was but an indifferent correspondent. His letters, when they did come, were but too confirmatory of the contents of those written by his brother, being generally solicitations for a little more cash. The *ci-devant* soldier, himself generous to a fault, had never failed to forward the cheque, caring less for the money than the way in which it was spent.

The education of the Harding youths was now considered complete. They were enjoying that pleasant interval of idleness, when the chrysalis of the school or college is about to burst forth into a butterfly, and wing its way through the world.

If the old rancour existed it showed no outward sign. A stranger would have seen nothing between the half-brothers beyond a fair fraternal friendship. Henry was frank and outspoken, Nigel reserved and taciturn; but this was their natural disposition, and no one remarked upon it. In all matters of parental respect, the elder brother was the

more noticed. He was implicit in his obedience to the wishes of his father ; while Henry, on the other hand, was prone to neglect this duty—though only in matters of minor consequence, such as keeping late hours, lavish expenditure, and the like. Still, by such acts the father's heart was often sorely grieved, and his affection terribly tested.

At length came a cause that tried the temper of the half-brothers towards one another—one before which the strongest fraternal affection has oft changed into bitter hostility. It was love. Both fell in love, and with the same woman—Belle Mainwaring.

Miss Belle Mainwaring was a young lady, whose fair face and fascinating manners might have turned wiser heads than those of the two ex-collegians. She was older than either ; but if not in its first blush, she was still in the bloom of her beauty. Like her baptismal name, she was a belle in her own county, which was that inhabited by the Hardings. She was the daughter of an Indian officer, a

poor colonel, who, less fortunate than the General, had left his bones in the Punjaub, and his widow just sufficient to maintain her in a simple cottage residence that stood outside, and not far from, the palings of Beechwood Park.

It was a dangerous proximity for two youths just entering on manhood, and with very little business before them beyond making love, and afterwards settling down with a wife. Both would be amply provided for without troubling their heads about a profession. The paternal estate, under the hammer, would any day have realised a clear hundred thousand; and he who cannot live upon half of this is not likely to increase it by a calling.

That the property would be equally divided there was no reason to doubt. There was no entail; and General Harding was not the man from whom an act of partiality might be expected. The old soldier was not without traits of eccentricity; not exactly crotchets or caprices, but a certain dogmatism of design, and an un-

willingness to be thwarted in his ways, derived no doubt from his long exercise of military authority. This, however, was not likely to influence him in matters of a paternal character ; and, unless some terrible provocation should arise, his sons, at his death, would no doubt have an equal share in the earnings of his life.

So thought the social circle in which the Hardings moved, or such part of it as took this much interest in their movements. With such fair presumption of being provided for, what could the young Hardings do but look out for something to love, and, in looking out, upon whom should the eyes of both become fixed but on Belle Mainwaring ? They did, with all the ardent admiration of youth ; and as she returned their respective glances with that speaking reciprocity which only a coquette can give, both fell in love with her. The inspiration came on the same day, the same hour, perhaps in the same instant.

It was at a grand archery *fête*, given by the General himself, to which Miss Mainwaring

and her mother had been invited. The archer god was also present at the entertainment, and pierced the hearts of General Harding's two sons with a single arrow.

There was a remarkable difference in their way of showing it. To Miss Mainwaring, Henry was all assiduity, lavish of little attentions, ran to recover her arrows, handed her her bow, held her sunshade while she bent it, and stood ready to fling himself at her feet. Nigel, on the other hand, kept himself aloof, affected indifference to her presence, tried to pique her by showing partiality to others, with many like manœuvres suggested by a calculating and crafty spirit. In one thing the elder brother succeeded—in concealing his new-sprung passion from the spectators.

The younger was not so fortunate. Before the archery practice was over, every guest upon the ground could tell that, at least, one arrow had been shot home to the mark, and that mark was the heart of young Henry Harding.

CHAPTER IV.

A COQUETTE.

I HAVE often wondered what the world would be without woman: whether, if it were without her, man would care longer to live in it; or whether he would then find it just the place he has been all his life longing for, and would wish never to leave it. I have wondered and pondered upon this point, until speculation became lost in obscurity. It is, perhaps, the most interesting philosophical question of our existence—its most important one; and yet no philosopher, as far as I know, has given a satisfactory answer to it.

I am aware of the two theories that have been propounded—to one another opposite as are the poles. One makes woman the sole object of our existence—her smile its only

blessing. For her we work and watch, we dig and delve, we fight and write, we talk and strive. Without her we would do none of these things; in short, do nothing, since there would be no motive for doing. "What then?" say the advocates of this theory. "Would existence be tolerable without a motive? Would it be possible?" For our part we can only give the interrogative answer of the phlegmatic Spaniard, "*Quien sabe?*" — no answer at all. The other theory is, that woman, instead of being life's object and blessing, is but its distraction and curse. The supporters of this hypothesis make no pretence to gallantry, but simply point to experience. Without her, say they, the world would be happy, and they triumphantly add, "what is it?"

Perhaps the only way to reconcile the two theories is to steer midway between them; to regard both as wrong, and both as right; to hold woman in this world as being alike a blessing and a bane; or rather that there are

two sorts of women in it, one born to bless, the other to curse—mankind.

It grieves me to class Belle Mainwaring with the latter: for she was beautiful, and might have belonged to the former. I knew her myself—if not well, at least sufficiently to give her correct classification. Perhaps I, too, might have fallen under her fascinations, had I not discovered that she was false, and this discovery protected me.

I made my discovery just in time, though by accident. It was in a ball-room. Belle liked dancing, as do most young ladies of the attractive kind; and there were but few balls in the county, public or private, civilian or military, where you might not see her. I met her at the hunt ball of B——. It was the first time I had seen her. I was introduced by one of the stewards who chanced to have an impediment in his speech. It was of the nasal kind, caused by a split lip. In pronouncing the word “captain” the first syllable came out sounding as “count.” There was

then a break, and the second, "ain," might have been taken, or *mis*-taken, for the prefix "von." My Christian and baptismal names, slurred together as they were by the stammering steward, might have passed muster as Germanic; at all events, for some time afterwards—before I could find an opportunity to rectify the error—I was honoured by Miss Mainwaring with a title that did not belong to me. I was further honoured by having it inscribed upon her dancing card much oftener than I, in my humility, had any right to expect. We danced several measures together, round and square. I was pleased, flattered—something more—charmed and delighted. Who would not, at being so signalised by one of the belles of the ball-room? And she was one.

I began to fancy that it was all up with me—that I had found not only an agreeable partner for the night, but for life. I was all the better satisfied to see scowling faces around me, and hear whispered insinuations, that I was having more than my share of

the charming creature. It was the pleasantest hunt ball I had ever attended.

So far up to a certain hour. Then things became less agreeable. I had deposited my partner on a couch, alongside a stately dame, introduced to me as her mother. I saw that this lady did not take kindly to me; but, on the contrary, sat stiff, frigid, and uncommunicative. Failing to thaw her, I made my bow and sauntered off among the crowd, promising to return to Miss Mainwaring for still another dance, for which I had succeeded in engaging her. Not being able to find any comfort apart from her, I soon returned, and sat down on a chair close to the couch occupied by mother and daughter. As they were engaged in close conversation, neither of them saw me, and of course I did not intrude. But, as their voices were above a whisper, I could not help hearing them; and the mention of my own name made it difficult for me to withdraw.

“A count!” said the mother; “you are beside yourself, my child.”

"But Mr. Southwick introduced me to him as such, and he has all the air of it."

All the air of it !—I liked that.

"Count Fiddlestrings. Mr. Southwick is a fool and an ass. He's only a paltry captain—on half-pay at that, without the shadow of an expectation. Lady C—— has been telling me all about him."

"Indeed !"

I thought there was a sigh, but I could not be sure of it. I should have liked it very much; but then what came after would, or should, have rendered me indifferent to it.

"And you've engaged yourself to him for another dance, while young Lord P—— has been twice here to ask for you—absolutely on his knees for me to intercede for him !"

"What's to be done ?"

"Done ! throw him over. Tell him you forgot that you had a previous engagement with Lord P——."

"Very well, mamma, if you say so, I'll do that. I'm so sorry it should have happened."

There was no sigh this time, else I might

have held my peace, and stolen quietly away. But I found I could not retreat without being discovered. In fact, I was at that moment discovered, and determined on making a clean breast of it.

“I should be sorry, Miss Mainwaring,” I said, addressing myself directly to the daughter, and without heeding the confusion of herself or her mother, “to stand in the way of a previous engagement, and rather than Lord P—— should get on his knees for the third time, I beg to release you from that you have made with a paltry captain.”


With a bow, which I considered suitable to the circumstances, I parted from the Mainwarings, and did my best to get rid of my chagrin by dancing with any girl who would accept for her partner a captain on half pay! Fortunately, before the ball was over, I found one who caused me to forget my *contretemps* with Miss Belle Mainwaring. I often met this lady afterwards, but never spoke to her, except by that silent speech of the eyes that may sometimes say a good deal.

CHAPTER V.

TWO STRINGS TO THE BOW.

It might have been well for young Henry Harding, and perhaps his brother Nigel, too, in their first essay at love-making with Miss Mainwaring, had they met with a similar mischance to that which had befallen me, and taken it in the same spirit. As it was, they were either more or less fortunate. Neither was a half-pay captain, without expectations; and, instead of a discouragement almost amounting to dismissal, for a long time both were permitted to bask in the smiles of the beautiful Belle.

There was a marked difference in the way the two brothers respectively pressed their suit. Henry essayed to carry Belle Main-



ware's heart by storm. Nigel, as his nature dictated, preferred making approach by sap and trenching. The former made love with the boldness of the lion; the latter with the insidious stealth of the tiger. When Henry believed himself successful he made no attempt to conceal his gratification. When the chances seemed to go against him, with equal openness did he exhibit his chagrin. The reverse with Nigel. When fortune appeared to smile upon his suit he showed no sign of being conscious of it. He appeared alike impassable under her frown. So little demonstrative was he in his affection for Miss Mainwaring that there were few people believed in it, though among this few was the lady herself.

From what I could learn, and sometimes by the evidence of my own eyes, she played her cards to perfection — her mother acting as *croupier* to the game. It was not long before she knew that she could take her choice of the two, though some time before she declared it. Now one appeared to be the favourite,

anon the other—until the most intimate of her associates were puzzled as to her partiality, or whether she even cared for either. It was at least a question; for the beautiful Belle did not restrict herself to receiving the admiration of the half-brothers Harding. There were other young gentlemen in the neighbourhood, who at balls and other gatherings were favoured with an occasional smile; and Miss Mainwaring's heart was considered still doubtful in its inclinings. There was a time, however, when it was supposed to have become decided. At all events, there was a reason for its doing so. An incident occurred in the hunting-field that should have entitled Henry Harding to the hand of Belle Mainwaring—that is, supposing it to be true that the brave deserve the fair. It was an incident so rare as to be worth recording, irrespective of its bearing upon our tale.

The hunt was with the staghounds, and the “meet” had taken place close to a pond of considerable size, upon one of the open com-

mons not rare among the Chiltern Hills. As the stag bounded away from the cart, his eye had caught the gleam of water, and in his hour of distress he remembered it. Being a lazy brute, he did not run far ; but, guided by instinct, soon turned back towards the pond. He arrived at it, before the carriages that had come to the meet had cleared away from the ground. Among them was the pony phaeton that contained Mrs. Mainwaring and her daughter Belle ; the latter looking as roseate on that crisp winter's morning as if her cheeks had taken their colour from the scarlet coats of the huntsmen around her. The *attelage* to which she belonged was drawn up close to the edge of the pond, parallel with its bank. The stag, on returning, shaved close past the pony's nose, and plunged into the water. The consequence was that the latter became alarmed even to frenzy ; and, instead of turning towards the road, it wheeled round in the opposite direction, and rushed into the pond after the stag, dragging the phaeton along

with it. It did not stop until the water was up over the steps of the carriage, and the ladies' feet were immersed in the chilly flood. But then the stag had stopped too, at bay; and, believing the "trap" to be its cruel pursuer, the bayed animal turned and charged upon the pony carriage and its contents. The pony was knocked down in the traces; and then came the boy in buttons, who was perched conspicuously on the seat behind. On the antlers of the enraged animal he was hoisted skyward, and fell with a plunge into the water. Next came the turn of the two ladies, or would have come, had relief not been near. The smock-frocks had gone away from the ground, following the chase; and it was not they who rushed to the rescue. Nor was it Nigel Harding, who was first by the edge of the pond, having got there through being last in the field. But there stayed he, sitting irresolute in his saddle; and Miss Mainwaring might have had a stag's antler through her delicate skin, but for Nigel's

brother coming up at the moment. He, instead of reining up by the water's edge, dashed in through it, till his horse stood by the side of the carriage. Next moment he sprang out of the saddle, and took the stag by the horns.

The struggle that ensued might have ended ill for him; but by this time a smock-frock, in the shape of a hedger, up to his armpits in the water, drew his chopper across the throat of the stag, and the conflict came to an end.


The pony, but slightly injured, was got upon its feet; the page, half-drowned, was hoisted back to his pinnacle; and the carriage, with its frightened occupants, conducted safely to the shore.

Everybody left the ground with the belief that Miss Belle Mainwaring would at some day, not far distant, become Mrs. Henry Harding. More especially did the country people believe it, and were delighted with the idea; for with them—as is generally the case—the younger brother was the favourite.

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It was not this, however, that at first troubled the spirit of the retired officer, but only the behaviour of his boys. With Nigel's he was contented enough. Than it, nothing could be more satisfactory, except in the estrangement towards his brother, and an occasional exhibition of ill-feeling which the father could not fail to perceive. It was Henry's conduct that formed the chief source of the General's anxiety—his extravagant habits, his proneness to dissipation, and once an apparent disobedience of paternal orders, which, though only in some trivial affair of expenditure, had been exaggerated by the secret representations of his elder brother into a matter of momentous importance. The counsels of the parent, not having been seriously taken to heart, soon became chidings; and these, in their turn, being alike unheeded, assumed the form of threats and hints about disinheritance.

Henry, who now deemed himself a man, met such reminders with a spirit of inde-



pendence that only irritated his father to a still greater degree. In this unhappy way were things going on, when the General was made aware of a matter more affecting the future welfare of his son than all the dissipations and disobediences of which he had been guilty. It was his partiality for Miss Mainwaring. Of Nigel's inclining toward the same quarter, he knew nothing; nor, indeed, did others; though almost everybody in the neighbourhood had long been aware of her conquest over Henry.

It was shortly after the incident at the stag-hunt that the General became apprised of it. That affair had led him to reflect; and, although proud of the gallantry his son had displayed, the old soldier saw in it a danger far greater than that of the struggle through which he had so conspicuously passed.

He was led to make inquiries, which resulted in a discovery giving him the greatest uneasiness. This arose from the fact, that he knew the antecedents of Mrs. Mainwaring. He had known both her husband and herself in India;

and this knowledge, so far from inspiring him with respect for the relict of his late brother-officer, had impressed him with the very opposite opinion. With the character of the daughter, he was, of course, less acquainted. The latter had grown up during a long period of separation; but from what he had seen and heard of her, since his arrival in England, and from what he was every day seeing and hearing, he had come to the conclusion, that it was a case of "like mother, like daughter."

And, if so, it would not suit his views, that she should become daughter-in-law to him.

The thought filled him with serious alarm; and he at once set about concocting some scheme to counteract the danger. How was he to proceed? Deny his son the privilege of keeping company with her? Lay an embargo on his visits to the villa cottage of the widow, which he now learned had been of late suspiciously frequent? It was a question whether his commands would be

submitted to, and this thought still further irritated him.

Over the widow herself he had no authority, in any way. Though her cottage stood close to his park, it was not his property; her landlord was a lawyer, of little respect in the neighbourhood; and it would have served no purpose even could he have, himself, given her notice to quit. Things had already gone too far for such strategy as that.

As for the damsel herself, she was not going to hide her beautiful face from the gaze of his son, solely to accommodate him. It might not appear any more in his own dining, or drawing room; but there were other places where it could be seen in all its bewitching beauty—in the church, or the hunting-field, —in the ball-room, and every day along the green lanes that encompassed Beechwood Park; there might it be seen, smiling coquettishly under the rim of a prettily-trimmed hat.

The old soldier was too skilled a tactician to believe, that any benefit could be obtained

from an attack so open to repulses, and these of the most humiliating character. Some stratagem must be resorted to; and to the conception of this he determined to devote all the energies of his nature.

He had already, in his mind, the glimmering of a scheme that promised success; and this imparted a ray of comfort, that kept him from going quite out of his senses.

CHAPTER VII.

PLOTTERS FOR FORTUNE.

THE stag hunt, at which Henry Harding had exhibited such gallant courage, had been the very last of the season ; and, soon after, spring stole over the shire of Bucks, clothing its beechen forests and grassy glades in a new livery of the gayest green. The crake had come into the cornfield, the cuckoo winged her way across the common, uttering her soft monotonous notes, and the nightingale had once more taken possession of the coppice, from whence, through the livelong night, pealed forth its incomparable song. It was the month of May—that sweet season when all nature seems to submit itself to the tender inclinations of love ; when not only the shy

birds of the air, but the chased creatures of the earth—alike tamed and emboldened by its influence—stray beyond the safety of their coverts in pursuit of those pleasures at other seasons denied them.

Whether the love-month has any influence on the passions of the human species, is a disputed question. Perhaps, in man's primitive state, such may have been the case, and Nature's suggestiveness may have extended also to him. But at whatever season affection may spring up between two young hearts, surely this is the time of the year that Nature has designed it to reach maturity.

It seemed so in the case of Henry Harding. In the month of May his passion for Belle Mainwaring had reached the point that should end in a declaration ; and upon this he had determined. With the outside world it was still a question whether his love was reciprocated, though it was generally thought that the coquette had been at length captured, and by Henry Harding. The eligibility of the

match favoured this view of the case, though, to say the truth, not more than the personal appearance of the man.

At this time the younger son of General Harding was just entering upon manhood, and possessed a face and figure alike manly and graceful. The only blemish that could be brought against him was of a moral nature—as already mentioned, a proneness to dissipation. But time might remedy this; and even as things stood it did not so materially damage him in the eyes of his lady acquaintances—more than one of whom would have been willing to take Miss Mainwaring's chances. The light in which Belle regarded him may be best learnt from a conversation that, about this time, took place. It was over the breakfast-table in her mother's cottage, the speakers being her mother and herself.

“And you would marry him?” interrogated Mrs. Mainwaring, after some remark that had introduced the name of Henry Harding.

"I would, mamma; and, with your leave, I will."

"What about *his* leave?"

"Ha! Ha!" laughed Belle with a confident air. "I think I may count upon that. He has as good as given it."

"Already! But has he really declared himself—in words I mean?"

"Not exactly in words. But, dear ma, since I suppose you will insist upon knowing my secrets before giving your consent, I may as well tell you all about it. He intends to declare himself soon; this very day if I am not astray in my chronology."

"What reason have you for thinking so?"

"Only his having hinted that he had something important to say to me—time fixed for a call he is to make this afternoon. What else could it be?"

Mrs. Mainwaring made no reply, but sat thoughtful, as if not altogether pleased with the communication her daughter had made.

"I hope, dear mamma, you are contented?"

"With what, my child?"

"With—with—well, to have Henry Harding for your son-in-law. Does it satisfy you?"

"My dearest child," answered the Indian officer's widow, with that cautious air peculiar to her country—she was Scotch. "It is a serious question this; very serious, and requires careful consideration. You know how very straitened are our circumstances—how your poor dear father left little to support us—having but little to leave?"

"I should think I do know," peevishly interposed Belle. "Twice turning my ball dresses, and then dyeing them into wearing silks, has taught me all that. But what has it to do with my marrying Henry Harding? All the more reason why I should. He, at all events, is not likely to be troubled with straitened circumstances."

"I am not so sure of that, my child."

"Ah! you know something about his expectations then? Something you have not told me? Is it so, mamma?"

"I know very little. I wish it were otherwise, and I could be sure."

"But his father is rich. There are but two sons; and you have already told me that the estate is not entailed, or whatever you call it. Of course he will divide it equally between them. Half would satisfy me."

"And me too, child, if we were sure of half. But there lies the difficulty. It is the fact of the estate not being entailed that makes it. Were that done, there would be none."

"Then I could marry Henry?"

"No, Nigel."

"Oh, mamma! what do you mean?"

"The estate would then be Nigel's by the simple law of entail. As it is now, it is all uncertain how they will inherit. It will depend on the will. It may go by a caprice of their father—and I know General Harding well enough to believe him capable of such caprice."

In her turn Belle became silent and thoughtful.

"There is reason to fear," continued the match-making, perhaps match-spoiling, mother, "that the General may leave Henry nothing, or at most only a maintenance. He is certainly very much dissatisfied with his conduct, and for a long time has been vainly endeavouring to change it. I won't say the young man is loose in his habits; if he were, I would not hear of him for your husband. No, my child, poor as we are, it needn't come to that."

As the widow said this she looked half interrogatively towards her daughter, who replied with a smile of assenting significance.

"Henry Harding," continued the cautious mother, "is too generous—too profuse in his expenditures."

"But, mamma, would not marriage cure him of that? He would then have me to think of, and take better care of his money."

"True, true; supposing him to be possessed of it. But therein lies the doubt—the difficulty, I may call it—about the prudence of your accepting him."

"But I love him; I do indeed!"

"I am sorry for that, my child. You should have been more cautious, until better assured about his circumstances. You must leave it to time. You will, if you love me."

"And if, as I have told you—this afternoon—what answer?"

"Evasive, my dear. Nothing easier. You have me to fall back upon. You are my only child; my consent will be necessary. Come, Belle! you need no instructions from me. You will lose nothing by a little procrastination. You have nothing to fear from it, and everything to gain. Without it, you may become the wife of one poorer than ever your father was; and, instead of having to turn your silk dresses, you may have none to turn. Be prudent, therefore, in the step you are about to take."

Belle only answered with a sigh; but it was neither so sad or so deep as to cause any apprehension to her counsellor; while the sly look that accompanied it told, that she determined upon being *prudent*.

CHAPTER VIII.

FATHER AND SON.

GENERAL HARDING was accustomed to spend much time in his studio, or library it might be called—since it contained a goodly number of books. They were mostly volumes that related to Oriental subjects, more especially works upon India and its campaigns; but there were also many devoted to science and natural history, while scattered here and there upon tables were odd numbers of the *Oriental Magazine*, the *Transactions of the Asiatic Society*, and the *Calcutta Englishman*. There were also large pamphlets in blue parliamentary covers, that related only to the affairs of the Hon. E. I. C.

In poring over these volumes, the retired

militaire was accustomed to pass much of his time. The subjects, with the descriptions attached, recalled scenes in his past life, the souvenirs of which gave him pleasure, enabling him to while away many an hour that, amidst the seclusion of the Chiltern Hills, might have otherwise hung rather heavily on his hands. Each new book about India was sure to find its way into the General's library, and, though never a very keen sportsman, he could enjoy the descriptions of hunting scenes to be found in the pages of "Markham" and the "Old Shikaree," since in both there is something to interest not only the sportsman but the student of Nature.

On a certain morning he had entered his studio, but with no intention of devoting himself to the tranquil study of his books. On the contrary, he did not even seat himself, but commenced pacing the floor with a quick step; while his clouded brow denoted agitation of mind. Every now and then he would stop, strike his clenched hand against his

forehead, mutter a few words to himself, and then move on again. Among his mutterings could be distinguished some words that guided to the subject of his thoughts. The names "Nigel" and "Henry" constantly occurring, told that both his sons had a share in his cogitations, though chiefly the latter, whose cognomen was most frequently pronounced.

"This boy Henry has half driven me mad with his wild ways. And now, worse than all, his affair with this girl. From what I have heard, there can be no doubt that she's entangled him; no doubt of its having become serious. It won't do; must be broken off, cost what it will. She's not the stuff to make an honest man's wife out of. I'd care less if it were Nigel. But no, she won't do for either—for no son of mine. I knew her mother too well. Poor Mainwaring! Many a dog's day he spent with her in India. Like mother, like daughter. By heavens, it won't do; and I shall put a stop to it! I think I know how,"

continued he reflectingly. "If he's mad, she isn't; and therein I may find my means for saving the poor lad from the worst of all misfortunes—a wicked wife."

The General made several turns in silence, as if maturing some plan.


"Yes; that's the way to save him!" he at length joyfully exclaimed; "perhaps the only way. And there's no time to be lost about it. While I'm thinking he may be acting—may have gone too far for me to get him out of the scrape. I shall see him at once—see and question him."

The General stooped over the table; pressed upon a spring bell; and then resumed his pacing.

The bell brought up the butler, a portly individual, who so far as could be judged by appearance, was as respectable as the General himself.

"Williams! I wish to see my son Henry;—find out if he's upon the premises."

"He's on the premises, General. He's



down at the stables. Groom says he's going to mount the brown filly."

"The brown filly? Why she's never been ridden before!"

"She never has, General. I think it very dangerous; but that's just what Master Henry likes. I tried to persuade him against it, but then Master Nigel told me to mind my own business."

"Send quick to the stable; tell him I forbid his riding the filly. Tell him to come hither. Haste, Williams, haste!"

"Ever running into danger, as if he loved it," said the General, continuing his soliloquy; "so like what I was myself. The brown filly! Ah! I wish this was all. The Mainwaring damsel's a worse danger than that."

At this moment Henry made his appearance, breeched, booted, and spurred, as if for the hunting-field.

"Did you send for me, father?"

"Of course I did. You were going to mount the brown filly?"

"I am going. Have you any objection to my doing so?"

"Do you want your neck broken?"

"Ha, ha, ha! There's not much fear of that. I think you make light of my horsemanship, papa."

"You carry too much confidence, sir—far too much. You mount a vicious mare without consulting me. You do other and more important things without consulting me. I intend putting a stop to it."

"What other things do you refer to, father?"

"Many other things. You spend money foolishly—like a madman; and, like a maniac, you are now rushing upon a danger of a still graver kind—upon destruction, sir—rank, absolute destruction."

"Of what are you speaking, father? Do you mean by my mounting the filly?"

"No, sir. You may back her, and break your neck, for aught I care. I'm speaking of what's far wickedder—a woman."

The word woman caused the youth to turn

pale. He had thought that, to his father at least, his love for Miss Mainwaring was still a secret. No other woman could be meant.

"I do not understand you, papa," was his evasive response.

"But you do, sir—perfectly. If I gave you the name of this woman, you wouldn't be any the wiser than you are now; you know it too well. I'll tell you, for all that. I refer to Miss Belle Mainwaring."

Henry made no reply, but stood blushing in the presence of his parent.

"And now, sir, about this woman I have only a few words to say—you *must give her up*."

"Father!"

"I won't listen to any of your love-sick appeals. Don't make them—they'll only be wasted on me. I repeat, sir, you must give Belle Mainwaring up—at once, absolutely, and for ever!"

"Father," said the youth, in a firm tone, within his breast love pleading for justice, "you ask me to do what's not in my power.

I acknowledge that between myself and Miss Mainwaring there is something more than the affection of friendship. It has gone further than mere feeling. There have been words—I may say promises—between us. To break them, requires the consent of both parties; and for me to do so, without first consulting her, would be a cruel injustice, to which I cannot lend myself. No, father; not even with the alternative of incurring your displeasure.”

General Harding stood for a moment silent; pretending to reflect, but furtively contemplating his son. A superficial observer could have seen only anger at this filial defiance, where one clever in reading faces might have detected something like admiration mingling with the sentiment. If there was such, however, in his heart, his speech did not show it.

“Enough, sir! You have made up your mind to disobey me? Very well. Understand what this disobedience will cost you. I



suppose you know the meaning of an entailed estate?"

The General paused, as if for an answer.

"I know nothing about it, papa. Something connected with a will, I believe."

"The very reverse. An entailed estate has nothing to do with a will. Now, my estate is *not* entailed, and *is* connected with a will. It is about that I am going to talk to you. I can make one, giving my property to whomsoever I please; either to your brother Nigel or yourself. Marry Miss Mainwaring, and it shall be Nigel's. Still, to you I shall leave just enough to carry you out of the country—that is one thousand pounds sterling. Now, sir, you hear what I have to say."

"I hear it, father; and with sorrow. I shall be sorry to lose the inheritance I had reason to expect, but far more your esteem. Both, however, must be parted with, if there be no other consideration for my retaining them. Whether I am to marry Miss Mainwaring or not, must depend upon Miss

Mainwaring herself. I think, father, you understand me?"

"Too well, sir—too well; and I answer by telling you that I have passed my word, and it shall be kept. You may go and mount the filly, and thank God she don't do with your neck what you are likely to do with your father's heart—break it. Begone, sir!"

Without saying a word, Henry walked out of the room, slowly and sadly.

"The image of his mother! Who could not help liking the lad, in spite of his rebellious spirit, and with all his wasteful habits? It won't do to have such a noble heart sacrificed upon a worthless jade of a woman. He must be saved."

Once more the General pressed upon the spring-bell, this time more violently than before. It brought the butler back in double quick time.

"Williams!"

"General?"



“My carriage, as soon as the horses can be put to?”

Williams disappeared to cause execution of the order.

A few more turns to and fro across the Turkey carpet, a few muttered soliloquies, and the carriage wheels grated upon the gravel outside.

Williams helped the General to his hat and gloves; saw him down-stairs; handed him into the carriage; and watched it rolling away, just as Henry, on the back of the brown filly, was fighting her across the green sward of the park, endeavouring to keep her head in the opposite direction.

CHAPTER IX.

THE CHECKMATE.

MR. WOOLET sat in his office, which was separated from that of his solitary clerk by a thick wall and a narrow doorway between. But there was another wall of slighter dimensions, alongside Mr. Woolet's room, partitioning off a kind of cupboard enclosure, into which, when Mr. Woolet required it, the said clerk could introduce himself, and there, standing cat-like and silent, hear what passed between his employer and any client whose conversation it was deemed necessary to make note of.

After this it is scarce necessary to add that Mr. Woolet was an attorney; and though the scene of his practice was a quiet country town, in the shire of Bucks, this practice was carried

on with as much sharpness and trickery, as if it lay among the low courts surrounding Newgate, or the slums of Clerkenwell.

The great city does not monopolise the plant called *pettifogging*. It thrives equally as strong in the county town. Even the village knows it to its cost ; and the poor cottager, in his leaky shed at three shillings a week, is too often encompassed by its toils.

Of such small fry Mr. Woolet had hooked his hundreds, and had prospered by their capture to the keeping of a carriage and pair ; but, as yet, none of the big fish had entered his net—the largest being the widow Mainwaring, who had been caught while taking from him a lease of her cottage. The carriage had, therefore, been kept to no purpose, or less than none : since not being in accord with his position it only brought him ridicule. This, however, could not last for ever. The gentry could not always hold out against such a glittering attraction. Some swell must in time stand in need of Mr. Woolet's peculiar services,

4

and enable him to achieve the much wished-for position. And so it seemed to turn out, as one day a carriage much grander than Mr. Woolet's own, with a coachman nearly a quarter of a ton in weight, and a powdered footman beside him, drove through the street of the little town in which Mr. Woolet lived, and pulled up opposite his office.

Perhaps the lawyer was never more delighted in his life, than when his clerk protruded his phiz inside the office-door, and announced *sotto voce* the arrival of General Harding. In a moment after the same individual ushered the General into his presence. A masonic sign communicated to the clerk caused his disappearance; and the instant after that pale-faced familiar was skulking like a ghost within the cupboard enclosure.

"General Harding, I believe?" said the obsequious attorney, bowing to the lowest button of his visitor's surtout.

"Yes," bluffly responded the old soldier.
"That is my name. Yours is——"



"Woolet, General; E. Woolet, at your service."

"Well, I want some service from you—if you're not otherwise engaged."

"Any engagement, General, must stand aside for you. What can I do to oblige you?"

"To oblige me, nothing. I want your services as an attorney. You are one, I believe?"

"My name is in the Law List, General. You can see it here."

Mr. Woolet took up a small volume, and was handing it to the General.

"Never mind about the Law List," bluntly interrupted the soldier, "I see it on your sign; that's enough for me. What I'm in search of is an attorney who can make a will. I suppose you can do that?"

"Well, General, although I cannot boast of my professional abilities, I think I can manage the making of a will."

"Enough said; sit down and set about it."

Considering that he kept a carriage himself,


Mr. Woolet might have felt a little offended by this brusque behaviour on the part of his new client. It was the first time he had ever been so treated in his own office ; but then it was the first time he had ever had a client of such a class, and he knew better than to show feeling under the infliction.

Without saying another word, he sat down before his table, the General taking a seat on the opposite side, and waited for the latter to proceed.

“ Write now as I dictate,” said the General, without even prefixing the word “ please.”

The lawyer, still obsequious, signified assent, at the same time seizing a pen, and placing a sheet of blue foolscap before him.

“ I hereby will and bequeath to my eldest son, Nigel Harding, all my real and personal estate, comprising my houses and lands, as also my stock in personal securities, excepting one thousand pounds, to be sold out of the last, and paid over to my other and youngest son, Henry Harding, as his sole legacy left from my estate.”



To this extent the lawyer finished the writing, and waited for his client to proceed.

"You have done, have you?" asked the General.

"So far as you dictated, General, I have."

"Have you written down the date?"

"Not yet, General."

"Then put it in."

Woolet took up his pen, and complied.

"Have you a witness at hand? If not, I can bring in my footman."

"You need not do that, General. My clerk will do for one witness."

"Oh! it wants two, does it?"

"That is the law, General; but I myself can be the second."

"All right, then; let me sign."

And the General rose from his seat, and leaned towards the table.

"But, General," interposed the lawyer, thinking the will a somewhat short one, "is this all? You have two sons?"

"Of course I have. Haven't I said so in my will?"

"But, surely——"

"Surely what?"

"You are not going to——"

"I am going to sign my will, if you will allow me; if not, I must get it made elsewhere."

Mr. Woolet was too much a man of business to offer any further opposition. It was no affair of his beyond giving satisfaction to his new client; and to accomplish this he at once pushed the paper before the General, at the same time presenting him with the pen.

The General signed; the lawyer and his clerk—summoned from the cupboard—attested; and the will was complete.

"Now make me a copy of it," demanded the General. "The original you may keep till called for."

The copy was made; the General buttoned it up in the breast of his surtout; and then, without even cautioning the lawyer to secrecy,

stepped back into his carriage, and was soon rolling along the four miles of road lying between the village and his own residence.

“There’s something queer about all this,” soliloquised the pettifogger, when left alone in his office. “Queer he should come to me, instead of going to his own solicitor; and queerer still he should disinherit the younger son—or next thing to it. His property cannot be worth less than a cool hundred thousand pounds, and all to go to that half-negro, while the other, as most people thought, would have a half share of it. After all, it’s not so strange. He’s angry with the younger son; and in making this will he comes to me instead of going to Lawson, who he knows might say something to dissuade him from his purpose. I have no doubt he will stick to it, unless the young scamp leaves off his idle ways. General Harding is not a man to be trifled with, even by his own son. But whether this will is to remain good or not, it’s my duty to make it known to a third party, who for certain

reasons will be deeply interested in its contents; and who, whether she may ever be able to thank me for communicating them, will, at all events, keep the secret of my doing so. She shall hear of it within the hour."


"Mr. Robson!"

The pale face of the unarticled clerk appeared within the doorway—prompt as a stage spirit summoned through a trap.

"Tell the coachman to clap the horses into my carriage—quick as tinder."

The spirit disappeared without making any reply, and just as his invoker had finished the folding of the lately attested will, and made a minute of what had transpired between him and the testator, carriage wheels were heard outside the door of the office.

In six seconds after Mr. Woolet was in his "trap"—as he used condescendingly to call it—and rattling along a country road, the same taken ten minutes before by the more ostentatious equipage of the retired Indian officer.



Although driving the same way, the destination of the two vehicles was different. The chariot was bound for Beechwood Park, the "trap" for a less pretentious residence outside its enclosure—the villa-cottage occupied by the widow Mainwaring.

CHAPTER X.

THE BAIT TAKEN.

THE relict of the late colonel, who had left his bones in the Punjaub and herself with only a slight maintenance, had nevertheless sufficient to maintain a "turn-out." True it was but a pony and phaeton; but the pony was spirited, the phaeton a neat one, and with the charming Belle in it, hat on head, whip and ribbons in hand, it might have been termed stylish. The appearance was improved by a boy in buttons, who sat upon the back seat, well trained to sustain the dignity of the situation.

This choice little tableau of country life might have been seen at the gate of Mrs. Mainwaring's villa at eleven o'clock of that

same day, on which the conversation already reported had passed between herself and her daughter in the breakfast-room.

It was an early hour for a drive; but it was to be a journey upon business to her lawyer. It was never made; for just as the sprightly Belle had taken her seat in the phaeton, adjusted her drapery, and commenced "catching flies" with her whip, what should appear coming up the road, and at a spanking pace, but the two-horse trap of that lawyer himself, Mr. Woolet.

The trap was evidently *en route* for the widow's residence, where more than once it had brought its owner upon matters of business. Its approach was a fortunate circumstance; so thought Mrs. Mainwaring, so thought her daughter, neither of whom on that particular day desired to go to the town. It was not one that had been set apart for shopping; more important matters were on the *tapis*, and these could be arranged with Mr. Woolet on the spot. The phaeton was at once abandoned,

“Buttons” receiving orders to keep the pony by the gate, and the ladies, followed by the lawyer, returned into the cottage. The attorney was received in the drawing-room; but, as the business could have nothing to do with the beautiful Belle, her presence was excused, and she sauntered out again, leaving her mother alone with Mr. Woolet.

Though there was still a certain obsequiousness about the lawyer’s manner, it was very different from that he had exhibited when dealing with General Harding. There was a vast distinction between a live General, possessed of a clear hundred thousand pounds, and a defunct colonel’s widow, with scarce so many pence. Still, Mrs. Mainwaring was a lady of acknowledged social position, with a daughter who might at no distant day have the *control* of a gentleman who had a hundred thousand pounds, and who might become a profitable client of whoever chanced at the time to be her mother’s solicitor. Mr. Woolet was a sharp, far-seeing individual, and this forecast

had not escaped him. If he showed himself more at ease in the presence of the colonel's widow than he had done in that of the General, it was simply because he recognised in the lady a nature like his own—less scrupulous upon points of honour or etiquette.

“Have you any business with me, Mr. Woolet?” asked the lady, without making known the fact that she was about going on business to him.

“Well, Mrs. Mainwaring, scarce enough to make it worth while my calling on you—at all events, interrupting your drive. What I have to say may be of no importance—but five minutes will suffice for saying it.”

“Take what time you please, Mr. Woolet; our drive had no object—a little shopping affair of my daughter's, that can be disposed of at any hour. Please be seated.”

The lawyer took a chair; the lady sank into a couch.

“Something, I suppose, connected with the cottage?” she continued in a tone of studied

indifference. "I think the rent is paid up to——"

"Oh, nothing of that," interrupted the lawyer. "You are too punctual in your payments, Mrs. Mainwaring, to need reminding from me. I have come upon an affair that, indeed, now that I think of it, may look like interference on my part. But it is one that may be of importance, and, studying your interest as my client, I deem it my duty to interfere. I hope, if in error, you will not be offended by my apparent over-zeal."

The widow opened her eyes, once beautiful enough, but now only expressive of surprise. The manner of the attorney, his tone of confidence—of an almost friendly assurance—led her to look for some pleasant revelation. What could it be?

"Over-zeal on your part can never be offensive, Mr. Woolet—at least, not to me. Please let me know what you have to communicate. Whether it concern me or not, I promise you it shall have my full con-

sideration, and such response as I can give."

"First, Mrs. Mainwaring, I must ask a question that from any other might be deemed impertinent. But you have done me the honour to trust me as your legal adviser, and that must be my excuse. There is a rumour abroad—indeed, I might say, something more than a rumour—that your daughter is about to be—to contract an alliance with one of the sons of General Harding. May I ask if this rumour has any truth in it?"

"Well, Mr. Woolet, to you I shall answer frankly: there is some truth in it."

"May I further ask which of the General's sons is to be the fortunate, and, I may say, happy individual?"

"Really, Mr. Woolet! But why do you want to know this?"

"I have a reason, madam—a reason that also concerns yourself, if I am not mistaken."

"In what way?"

"By reading this, you will learn."

A sheet of bluish foolscap, with the ink scarce dried upon it, was spread out before the eyes of the widow. It was the will of General Harding.

She coloured while reading it. With all the coolness of her Scotch blood; with all the steadiness of nerve produced by an eventful life—in long accompaniment of her husband in his campaigns—she could not conceal the emotion called forth by what she read upon the sheet of foolscap. It was like the echo of her own thoughts—a response to the reflections that, scarce an hour before, had been not only passing through her mind, but forming the subject of her conversation.

Adroitly as woman could—and Mrs. Mainwaring was not the most simple of her sex—she endeavoured to make light of the knowledge thus communicated. She was only sorry that General Harding should so far forget his duties as a parent, to make such a distinction between his two sons. Both were equally of his own blood; and, though the younger might

have been of better behaviour, still he was the younger, and time might cure him of those habits which appeared to have given offence to his father. For herself, Mrs. Mainwaring was very sorry indeed; and, although it did not so essentially concern her, she could not do otherwise than thank Mr. Woolet for his disinterested kindness in letting her know the terms of this strange testament. In fine, she would always feel grateful to him for what he had done.

The last clause of her speech was delivered in a tone not to be misunderstood by such an astute listener as Mr. Woolet; and at its conclusion he folded up the will, and prepared to take his departure. To repeat excuses, and say that he had only done what he deemed his duty, were empty words, and were so understood by both.

A glass of sherry, with a biscuit, and the interview came to an end. Mr. Woolet returned to his trap, and was soon rolling back to the town; while Buttons was commanded to take

back the pony to its stable. The sauntering Belle was summoned into the drawing-room.

"What did he want, mamma?" was her inquiry on entering. "Anything that concerns me?"

"I should think so. If you marry Henry Harding you will marry a *pauper*. I have seen the will. His father has disinherited him."

Miss Mainwaring sank upon the couch, with a cry that told rather of disappointment than despair.

CHAPTER XI.

AWAITING THE PROPOSAL.

IN the afternoon of that day Belle Mainwaring sat upon the couch in a state of expectation not easily described. The more difficult, from its being so rare—that is, the circumstances under which she was placed. She was in the position of a young lady who expects a proposal of marriage to be made to her, and who has already determined upon declining it. She was strong in this determination; though her strength came not from her own inclinations. She was but acting under the commands of her mother.

She was not without some sinking of spirits as to the course she was about to take. In reality she loved the man she was going to

reject—more than she imagined then, more than she knew until long afterwards. Flirt as she had been, and still was, conqueress of many a heart, she was not without one herself,—it might not be of the purest and truest; but, such as it was, Henry Harding appeared to have won it.

For all that, he was not to wear it; unless he could surround her with all the adornments of wealth, and the costliest luxuries of social life. She now knew he could not do this; and, though her heart might still be his, her hand must go to some other. To his brother Nigel, perhaps, she may have whispered to herself. She was a beautiful woman, Belle Mainwaring—tall, large, and exquisitely moulded—a figure that becomes the reclining attitude required by a couch; and, as she so reclined upon ordinary occasions, the coldest observer might well have been excused for admiring her gracefulness.

On the day in question her attitude was not graceful. It was not even easy, nor befitting

her figure. She sat bolt upright, now and then starting to her feet; pacing the room in quick, hurried strides; stopping a moment by the window, and scanning the road outside; and then returning to the couch, and staying upon it for a short time, as if a prey to terrible unrest and anxiety.


At times she would sit reflecting on the answer she should give; how it might be shaped, so as to make it least unpalatable to him who was to receive it. She had no doubt about its bitterness; for she felt confident in having the heart of the man about to offer her his hand. She did not wish to unnecessarily give him pain; and she studied the style of her intended refusal, until she fancied she had most cunningly arranged it. But then would come a spasm of her own heart's pain; for to say "No!" was costing it an effort; and at this the whole structure would give way, leaving her intended answer still unshaped.

Once she was on the point of changing her purpose; and, prompted by the nobility of

love, she came near giving way to her better nature. She had almost made up her mind to accept Henry Harding spite his adverse fortune—spite the counsels of her mother.

But the noble resolve remained but one moment in her mind. It passed like a flash of lightning, only showing more distinctly the dark clouds that would surround such a destiny. Henry disinherited—a thousand pounds alone left him! It would scarce be enough to furnish the feast, with the trousseau she might expect upon the day of her marriage. Preposterous! Her mother was right; she would yield to the maternal will.

There was another thought that held her to this determination. She felt confident in her conquest; and if at any future time she might see fit to give way to her predilection, it would still be possible to do so. General Harding would repent the disinheritance of his younger son, and revoke the will he had made, perhaps in a moment of spite or pas-



sion. Neither the lawyer who made it, nor her own mother, had any idea of the General's doing so. It was not in keeping with his character. But Belle believed differently. She saw through the eyes of hope, lighted by the light of love.

In such frame of mind did Miss Mainwaring await the expected visit of Henry Harding. Nor was there any change, when the boy in buttons announced his arrival, and the moment after ushered him into the room. Perhaps, just at that moment, at the sight of his handsome face and manly form, her heart may have faltered in its resolution. But only for an instant. A thought of his disinherittance, and it was again firm.

She was right as to the object of his coming. Indeed, he had all but declared it at their last interview—all but accomplished it. Words had already passed between them, that might have been construed as on his side a proposal, and on hers an acceptance. He now came in all the confident expectation of

formally closing the engagement by the terms of a betrothal.

Frank, loyal, and without thought of trick or deception, he at once declared his errand.

The answer went like an arrow through his heart—its poison but little subdued by the fact of its being conditional. The conditions were “the consent of mamma.”

Henry Harding could not understand this. She, the imperious belle, who in his eyes seemed armed with all power and authority, to have her happiness dependent on the will of a mother, and that mother known to be at the same time selfish and capricious! It was a rebuff unexpected, and filled him with forebodings, as to what might be the decision of Mrs. Mainwaring. He was not the man long to endure the agony of doubt; and at once demanded to see her.

His wishes were readily complied with; and, in less than five minutes after, the couch lately graced by the fair, frivolous daughter, was occupied by the staid, serious mother—

the daughter absenting herself from the interview.

In the frigid face of the widow Henry Harding read his fate. His forebodings were confirmed. Mrs. Mainwaring was sensible of the honour he would have conferred by becoming her son-in-law, and deeply thankful for the offer; but the position in which she and her daughter were placed made such a union impossible. Mr. Harding must know that, by the sudden death of her late dear husband, she had been left in straitened circumstances—that Belle would therefore be without fortune; and that as he, Mr. Harding, was in the same position, a union between the two would not only be impolitic, but absolute insanity. Though poor, her child had always been accustomed, if not to the luxuries, at least to the comforts of a home. What would be her condition as the mother of a family, with a husband struggling to maintain them? Mrs. Mainwaring could not speculate on such a fate for her dear child;

and, although Mr. Harding was young, and had the world all before him, he had not been brought up to any profession promising a maintenance, nor yet to those habits likely to lead to it. For these reasons she, Mrs. Mainwaring, must firmly, but respectfully, decline the offered alliance.

Throughout the speech, which partook somewhat of the nature of a lecture, Henry Harding sat listening in silence, but with astonishment strongly depicted in his features. This had reached its climax, long before the last sentence was delivered.

"Surely, madam," said he, giving vent to his surprise, "you cannot mean this?"

"Mean what, Mr. Harding?"

"What you have said of my inability to support a—your daughter. I know nothing of the struggle you speak of. I admit I have no profession; but my expectations are not so poor as to make it necessary I should have one. Half of my father's estate is sufficient to provide against such a future as you

allude to. And there are but two of us to share it."

"If that be your belief, Mr. Harding," rejoined the widow, in the same cold, relentless tone, in which she had all along been speaking, "I am sorry to be the first to disabuse you of it. The estate you speak of will not be so equally divided. Your share in it will be a legacy of a thousand pounds. Such a trifling sum would not go far towards the maintenance of an establishment."

Henry Harding stayed not to answer the last remark, made half interrogatively. In those that preceded it he had heard enough to satisfy him, that he had no longer any business in the drawing-room of Mrs. Mainwaring; and hurriedly recovering his hat and cane, he bade her an abrupt good morning.

He did not deign to address the same scant courtesy to her daughter. Between him and Belle Mainwaring was now opened a gulf so wide, that it could never be bridged over—not even to save him from a broken heart.

As the rejected lover strode away from the cottage that contained what he so lately looked upon as his *fiancée*, black clouds came rolling over the sky, as if to symbolise the black thoughts in his heart.

In all his youthful life it was the first great shock he had received; a shock both to soul and body—for in the announcement made by Mrs. Mainwaring there was a blow aimed at both. His love blighted, his fortune gone—both, as it were, in the same instant! But the bitterest reflection of all was that the love had gone with the fortune. The loss of the latter he could have endured; but to think that the sweet speeches that had been exchanged between him and Belle, the tender glances, and the soft, secret pressure of hands that more than once had been mutually imparted—to think that, on her side, all these had been false, heartless, and hollow, was enough to wound something more than the self-esteem of a nature noble as was his. He could frame no excuse for her conduct. He tried, but

without success. It was too clear, the cause of her refusal; too clear were the conditions on which she would have accepted his love, and had led him to believe in its acceptance. Her words and acts had been all pretence—the very essence of coquetry. It was over now, and with a bitter vow he resolved to expel her from his heart—from his thoughts, if that were possible. It was youth entering upon a hard struggle; but to a nature like his, and under such temptation to continue it, there was a chance of success. The woman he had hitherto looked upon as the type of all that was innocent and angelic, had proved herself not only capricious, but cunning, selfish, mean, less deserving of love than contempt. If he could but bear this impression upon his mind, there would be a hope of his recovering the heart he had so inconsiderately sacrificed. He registered a mental vow to do this, and then turned his thoughts towards his father. Against him he was all anger. He had no doubt the threat had been carried out; the will had

been made that very morning. The minuteness of Mrs. Mainwaring's information, even to the exact amount of his own legacy, left him no room to question its correctness. How she had obtained it he neither knew nor cared. She was sharp-witted enough to have placed herself in communication with his father's solicitor, whom he supposed to have made the will. But he did not stay to speculate upon this. His thoughts were all turned upon the testator himself, who by that single stroke had deprived him at once of his love and his living.

In the agony of his soul he could not see how his father had befriended him—how he had saved him from a fate far worse than disinheritance. His contempt for the cruel coquette was not yet decided enough for this.

His father's threat had been only conditional. He might look forward to a chance of the will being revoked. He might not be restored to full favour. There would be some punishment for his disobedience, which was

as complete as if his suit had succeeded. But such a grand penalty would scarce be exacted. It was not compatible with the indulgence he had already experienced.

A meaner spirit would have reasoned thus. Nigel Harding would have done so, and sought restoration to the paternal favour he had forfeited. Not so Henry. His pride had been touched—stung to the quick; and in the midst of his mortification, with his soul suffering from its thwarted passion, while pursuing the path homeward he resolved that his father's house should know him no more.

And he kept this resolution. On reaching the park-gates, instead of entering, he walked on to the nearest inn, and thence took a fly to the nearest railway station.

In another hour he was in the midst of the great metropolis, with no thought of ever again returning to the green Chiltern Hills, or the shire of Buckingham.

CHAPTER XII.

SELF-EXILED.

ON that same evening, as usual, there were four chairs placed at the dinner-table of General Harding. One was empty—that which should have been occupied by his younger son.

“Where is he?” asked the General, drawing the napkin across his breast.

Nigel knew not. Of course the maiden aunt could not tell. With her the scapegrace was not a favourite, and she took no heed of his movements. The butler was questioned, but did not know where Master Henry had gone. Nigel could only say he had seen him take the path towards the cottage of the Mainwarings; and a frown darkened his brow as he imparted the intelligence.

"He may have stayed for dinner," added the elder brother; "Mrs. Mainwaring makes him so welcome."

"She won't after a while," said the General, with a smile that to some extent relieved the frown also visible in his face.

Nigel looked at his father, but forbore asking for an explanation. He seemed to divine something that gave him relief, for the shadow upon his brow became sensibly lighter.

Upon that subject the conversation dropped; nor would it have been resumed again during dinner, but that before the meal ended a communication came into the room, through the medium of the butler. It was in the shape of a note, evidently scrawled in haste, and upon paper that could only have come from the *escritoire* of a cottage or a country inn. From the latter it had issued—the "Hare and Hounds," a hostelry that stood not far from the gates of General Harding's park, on the high road to London. There was no postmark—the letter having been hand-carried.

Hurried as was the scrawl of the superscription, the General recognised it as the handwriting of his son Henry. The shadow returned to his countenance as he tore open the envelope. It grew darker as he deciphered the contents of the note enclosed therein. They were as follows :—

“FATHER,—

“I say ‘father,’ since I cannot dis-simulate my real thoughts by prefixing the epithet ‘dear,’—when this reaches you I shall be on the road to London, and thence heaven knows where; but never more to return to a house which, by your own decreeing, can no longer be a home for me. I could have borne my disinheritance, for perhaps I deserve it; but the consequences to which it has led are too cruel for me to think of you otherwise than with anger. The deed is now done, and let that be an end of it. I write to you only to say that, since by the terms of your will I may some day become the fortunate recipient

of a thousand pounds, perhaps you will have no objection to pay it to me now, deducting, if you please, the usual interest—which I believe can be calculated according to the rules of the Insurance societies. A thousand pounds at your death—which I hope may be far distant—would scarce be worth waiting for. Now, it would serve my purpose, since I am determined to go abroad and seek fortune under some more propitious sky than that which extends over the Chiltern Hills. But if I do not find the sum at your London lawyer's within three days, subject to my order, I shall make my way abroad all the same. I am not likely ever to ask for it again. So, father, you may choose in this matter, whether to oblige me or not; and perhaps my kind brother Nigel, whose counsels you are so ready to take, may help you in determining the choice.

“HENRY HARDING.”

The General sprang from his chair, long before he had finished reading the letter. He

had read it by fits and starts, while striding about the room, and stamping his feet upon the floor, until the glasses jingled upon the table.

"My heavens!" he at length ejaculated, "what is the meaning of this?"

"Of what, dear father?" asked the obsequious Nigel. "You have received some unpleasant news?"

"News! news! worse than news!"

"From whom, may I ask?"

"From Henry—the scamp—the ungrateful—— Here, read this!"

Nigel took the note and read.

"It is indeed an unpleasant communication; unfeeling of Henry—insulting, I should say. But what does it all mean?"

"No matter what it means. Enough for *me* to know that. Enough to think that he is gone. I know the boy well. He will keep his word. He's too like myself about that. Gone! O God—gone!"

The General groaned as he traversed the Turkey carpet. The maiden aunt said nothing,

but sat by the table, quietly sipping port wine and munching walnuts. The storm raged on.

"After all," put in Nigel, with the pretence of tranquillising it, "he means nothing with this strange talk. He's young—foolish——"

"Means nothing!" roared the General in a fresh burst of excitement. "Does it mean nothing to write such a letter as this—in which every word is a slight to my authority—a defiance?"

"True enough," said Nigel, "I know not what can have possessed him to speak as he has done. He's evidently angry about something—something I don't understand. But he'll get over it in time, though one cannot forgive him so easily."

"Never! I will never forgive him. He has tried my temper too often; but this will be the last time. Disobedience such as his shall be overlooked no longer—to say nothing of the levity, the positive defiance, that accompanies it. By my faith, he shall be punished for it!"

"In that regard," interposed the unctuous elder son, "since he has spoken of my giving you advice, it would be to leave him to himself—at least for a time. Perhaps after he has passed some months without the extravagant support you have hitherto so generously afforded him, he may feel less independent, and more prone to penitence. I think the thousand pounds he speaks of your having promised him, and which I know nothing about, should be kept back."

"He shan't have a shilling of it—not till my death."

"For your sake, dear father, a long time, I hope; and for his, perhaps, it may be all the better so."

"Better or worse, he shan't have a shilling of it—not a shilling. Let him starve till he comes to his senses."

"The best thing to bring him to his senses," chimed in Nigel; "and take my word for it, father, it will do that before long—you'll see."

This counsel seemed to tranquillise the per-

turbed spirit of the irate General, at least for a time. He returned to the table and to his port; over which he sat alone, and to a much later hour than was his usual custom. The mellow wine may have made him more merciful; but whether it was this or not, before going to bed he returned to his studio, and wrote, in a somewhat unsteady hand, a letter to his London lawyer—directing the latter to pay to his son Henry, on demand, a cheque for the sum of £1,000.

He despatched the letter by a groom, to be in time for the morning post; and all this he did with an air of caution, as if he intended to do good by stealth. But what appears caution to the mind of a man obfuscated with over a bottle of port, may seem carelessness to those who are around him. There was one who looked upon it in this light. Nigel knew all about the writing of the letter, guessed its contents, and was privy to its despatch for the post. Outside the hall-door it was taken from the hands of the groom to

whom it had been intrusted, and transferred to the charge of another individual, who was said to be going past the village post-office. It was Master Nigel who caused the transference to be made. And from him the new messenger received certain instructions, in consequence of which the letter never reached its destination.

CHAPTER XIII.

LONDON THUGS.

ON arriving in London, Henry Harding put up at a West-end hotel, which he had allowed his cabman to select, for he knew very little of London or its life. He had only paid two or three transient visits to it, and but few of his father's acquaintances resided in the metropolis. Upon these he did not think of calling. He supposed that the affair with his father might have become known to them—perhaps his rejection by Belle Mainwaring—and he had resolved upon keeping out of sight, to avoid the necessity of concealing his chagrin. Henry Harding had a proud spirit, and could neither have brooked ridicule nor accepted sympathy. For this reason, instead of hunting out any old

college acquaintances he might have found in London, he rather avoided the chances of meeting them.

Besides the note written to his father, he had addressed one to the footman, simply directing this individual to pack up his clothes, guns, canes, and other impedimenta, and send them on to Paddington station, "till called for." This was done; and the luggage, in due time, arrived at the hotel where he was staying. Some eight or ten pounds of loose money, that chanced to be in his pocket on leaving home, was all the cash he commanded; and this was out of his pocket before he had been half that number of days in London.

For the first time in his life he began to find what an inconvenient thing it is to be without cash, especially in the streets of a large city—though he yet only knew it as an inconvenience. He expected his father would accede to the request he had made, and send an order for the payment of the thousand pounds. To allow time for the transaction, he kept away

from the solicitor's office for nearly a week. He then called to make the inquiry. It was simply whether any communication relating to him had been received from his father. In case there had been none, he did not wish the lawyer to be any wiser about the affair. None had been—not any. This was the answer given him.

In three days he called again, and reiterated his former inquiry almost word for word. Almost word for word was the answer he had—not from the solicitor himself, but the head clerk of his office. General Harding had written no letter lately to Messrs. Lawson and Son (the name of the firm), either in reference to him or any other matter. “He’s not going to send it,” bitterly soliloquised Henry as he left the solicitor’s office. “I suppose I’m not punished enough—so he thinks, with my precious brother to back him. Well, he can keep it. I shall never ask another shilling from him, if I have to starve.”

There is a sort of pleasure in this self-

abnegation—at least, during the incipient stages of it. But it is a pleasure traceable rather to revenge than virtue, and often dies out before the passion that has given it birth.

With Henry Harding it was not so short-lived. His spirit had been sorely chafed by the treatment he had received both from his sweetheart and his father. He could not separate them in his mind; and his resentment, directed against both, was strong enough to lead him to almost any resolution. He formed that of not going back to the office of the solicitor, and he kept it. It cost him a struggle, to which, perhaps, a less proud spirit would have yielded, for he was soon suffering from want of cash. His spendthrift life had suddenly come to an end, since he had no means of continuing it; and he was forced to the reflection how he could find the means of a mere living. He had changed his quarters to a cheaper hotel, but even this would require cash to pay for it, so that his circumstances were approaching desperation. What was he

to do? Enlist in the army? Offer himself on board a merchant ship? Drive a cab? Carry a sandwich? Or sweep a crossing? None of these occupations were exactly suited to his taste. Better than any or all of them—go abroad. There, if it come to the worst, he could try one or the other.

But there were other chances to be found abroad; and abroad he determined upon going. Fortunately he had sufficient left to carry him across the sea, even the great Atlantic Ocean; for, if his coin had been all spent, he had still something in the shape of a valuable watch, pins, rings, and other *bijouterie*, that could be converted into currency. These would yield enough to pay his passage to any part of the New World—for he intended going there, or to some distant land, far away from his father and Belle Mainwaring.

He had converted his chattels into cash—a thing that can be done in London in an incredibly short space of time, if we are not particular about the price. He had made a

visit to the West India Docks, for the purpose of inspecting an advertised ship, and was returning home not over-satisfied either with himself or his fortunes. The berth offered him was shabby, and not cheap, and he had hesitated about accepting it. He had gone afterwards to Greenwich Park—the Elysian fields of the humble excursionist—and there, of course, partaken of tea and shrimps. It was nearly twelve at night as he dismounted from the knife-board of a Holborn 'bus, and turned down Little Queen Street on the way to his quarters in Essex Street, Strand. He had taken a Paddington omnibus as the only one plying westward at that late hour.

As he stepped into the little street his eye fell upon an oyster-shop, usually open to the latest hours of the night, and some of the earliest of the morning. Not satisfied with the Greenwich diet of tea and shrimps—long since digested—he entered the oyster-shop, and gave an order for a dozen of those delicious bivalves to be opened for him. There was

another guest standing before the bar—a young man who having gone in before him, had given a similar order, and was already engaged in swallowing the shell-fish.

With the appearance of this young man Henry Harding was strangely impressed. He was handsome, of a complexion almost olive, dark curling hair, a full round eye, and an aquiline nose—features that at once proclaimed him a foreigner. The few words to which he gave utterance confirmed it. They were spoken in very imperfect English, with an accent which appeared to be Italian. Notwithstanding a somewhat threadbare suit of clothes, his bearing told either of birth or breeding; in short, one could not have made much of a mistake in supposing him to have been brought up a gentleman.


If Henry Harding had been asked why the young man interested him, he, perhaps, could not have told. But it was his well-bred air, coupled with garments that scarce corresponded; and, above all, the idea that he was

looking upon a stranger in a strange land, alone, perhaps friendless—a foreshadowing of his own future. These were the thoughts passing in his mind, which at the moment made him look with a friendly eye upon his fellow oyster-eater at the bar.

He was in the mood to have addressed him; but a certain air of seriousness in the young man's countenance, coupled with the fact of his speaking English so imperfectly, with a fear that the intrusion might be mistaken, hindered the young ex-squire of the Chilterns from taking this liberty.

The other merely glanced at him, and noticing an aristocratic face, with a Bond Street style of dress, supposed, no doubt, that he was standing beside some “swell,” who had stepped out of the Casino close by. Such a character would be no company for him; and with this reflection he finished his oysters, paid for them over the counter, and passed out into the street.

The young Englishman saw him depart with



a reflection just bordering on pain. There was a face that had strangely interested him. It was not likely in the great world of London he would ever see it again. Besides, he would soon himself be beyond the confines of that world, still further lessening the chances of a re-encounter. With this thought he dismissed the stranger from his mind, paid the reckoning at the oyster-bar, and made a fresh start for his lodgings in the Strand.

He had cleared Little Queen Street, and entered the sister street of similar name. The night was a dark one, and not a soul was to be seen or met: for he was now outside the meretricious circle of which at that hour the Holborn Casino is the centre.

He had turned his face towards Lincoln's Inn Fields, as along the western edge of this square was the shortest route to Essex Street. The ponderous arch was before him, and he was proceeding quietly towards it, when, under the long, low passage, dimly lit, he perceived what appeared to be the figures of three men.

One of them was apparently tipsy, the other two taking care of him.

He didn't much relish squeezing past this group; but there was no help for it, so he kept on. When close up to them he saw that the drunken man was absolutely helpless, his legs refusing to do him the slightest service, and he was only prevented from sinking down on the pavement by the support of his companions, one on each side of him. They halted under the shadow of the archway, and did not show any signs of moving onward. Perhaps they had had a long walk since leaving their "public," and wanted a little rest. That was no business of Henry Harding's, and he was quite contented to pass on without interfering—the more so as the countenance of one of the sober parties of the trio, turned for a moment towards him as he came up, clearly counselled the shunning of its owner.

He was passing on, and had already got beyond the group, when curiosity prompted

him to glance back. The face of a man so helplessly intoxicated as the one supported between the other two could not be other than a curious spectacle.

Henry Harding looked upon it. There was a lamplight near that enabled him to do so, and further to distinguish the countenance of the inebriate. It was not without an exclamation of surprise that he recognised the features which had so strangely interested him—those of the stranger late seen in the oyster-shop!

“What’s this?” he exclaimed, suddenly turning upon his heel, and facing the trio. “This gentleman drunk?”

“Drunk as Bacchis!” answered one of the men. “We’re tryin’ to get ’im home, an’ ha’ been at it for the best part o’ an hour.”

“Indeed!”

“Yis, sir. He’s had a drop too much, as ye see. He’s a friend of ours, and we don’t want the perlice to take him to the station.”

“Of course you don’t,” said the young

spring of Beechwood Park, now fully comprehending the case. "Well, that's kind of you both, but, as I am also a friend of this gentleman, you had better leave him in my charge, and save yourselves any further trouble. Do you agree to it?"

"Agree be blowed! What do you mean?"

"This!" shouted Henry, who could no longer restrain his indignation. "This!" he repeated, delivering a blow of his stout Buckinghamshire stick upon the head of one of the supporters—"and this!" he cried thrice in rapid succession, as the stick descended on the skull of the second scoundrel, and all three, garrotters and garrotted, sank together upon the pavement.

By the merest accident in the world, a policeman appeared upon the spot. In Lincoln's Inn Fields there are no area safes, and a great scarcity of rabbit-pie. As a consequence, the guardians of the night may be seen occasionally upon their beat; and, as good-luck would have it, one, sauntering along Great

Queen Street, heard the scuffle in the archway, and hastened towards the spot.

He came up in time to assist Henry Harding in securing the two garroters, and stripping them of the spoils they had taken from the person of the stranger, of which they had already possessed themselves. All went together to the police-station, the stranger having by this time partially recovered from his intoxication—*of chloroform*—whence, in a cab, he was taken by Henry Harding to his own lodgings, and left there—with a promise on the part of his rescuer to return to him on the following day.

CHAPTER XIV.

TURNED ARTIST.

A SLIGHT incident—the dropping of a pin, or the turning of a straw—may affect the whole current of a man's life. There may be a fixed fate: but if so, it often seems to be brought about, or depend upon, circumstances purely accidental. Had Henry Harding not gone home by Holborn Bars; had he not got down at the corner of Little Queen Street; had he not taken a fancy for shell-fish; had he not that day done a hundred other things, all of which may have indirectly conducted to the encounter described;—his after life might have been as different from what is to be chronicled, as if it were that of some other man.

In a week from that time he might have

been on his way to the West Indies, or some part of the great American continent, perhaps never to come back; whereas in a week from that time he was sitting in a studio, with a palette on his left thumb, a brush in his right hand, and an easel in front of him, while the classic blouse of brown holland and the embroidered smoking-cap told that he had turned artist.

The change in his life's programme can be easily explained. The gentleman he had rescued from the garrotters had become his patron; and, listening to the counsels of the young Italian artist—for such was he—he had himself taken to painting as a means of procuring his livelihood. Nor was it such a despairing adventure. He had already displayed taste in his school-drawings, and was, moreover, gifted with that aptitude for the art that usually leads to success. Almost from the first day spent in the studio he was enabled to produce sketches that could be sold; and these were followed by those “fur-

niture pictures" which have given not only practice but material support to many a struggling artist afterwards eminent in his profession, and who otherwise might never have been heard of.

The young Italian painter—Luigi Torreani by name—was himself but a beginner; but with that talent both of conception and execution, which distinguishes the countrymen of Titian, he was rapidly rising in his profession. He had got beyond the point of painting for mere bread, and was receiving a price for his pictures that promised something more than a subsistence.


It was upon the strength of his own success that he had given counsel to his new acquaintance. He had done so, after ascertaining something of the situation and prospects of the strong, gallant youth who had done him such an essential service. Henry at the time had told him but little of his antecedents. This was not needed to a mind generous as that of Luigi Torreani, and a heart at the

same time touched with a sense of gratitude. On discovering the young Englishman's project of self-banishment from his native land, he combated the idea with his counsel, and proposed, in the event of his abandoning it, to instruct him in his own art. In fine, his proposal was accepted, and Henry Harding adopted the profession of painter.

From acquaintances thus strangely introduced to each other, the two young men, not greatly differing in years, became fast friends, sharing apartments, table, studio together, and for many months the friendly association was continued. It was interrupted only by the advice of Luigi, who, deeply interested in the success of his brother artist, became desirous that the latter should spend some time in Rome, to perfect himself in his art by contemplating those classic forms so plentiful in the ancient metropolis of the world. For himself, the young Italian needed no such suggestive models. A Roman by birth, he had commenced his studies in their midst, and had

ended by transferring his practice to that metropolis where the painting of them was sure to be best paid for. The education of his pupil, then, was to be the reverse of his own. The young English gentleman accepted the advice, less from any profound love of his art or ambition to excel in it, than from a longing, such as most youths feel, to look upon Italy. Italy ! the classic land of our school-boy exercises ! the land of bright skies and soft summer scenes ! the land of Tasso, of Ariosto, Byron, Boccaccio, and the brigands ! Who does not desire to behold such a country, classically poetical in its past, romantically picturesque in its present, and, it is hoped, to be free and prosperous in its future ?

Henry Harding longed to look upon this land ; and mingled with his longings was a hope he might there find *Lethe*, or at least some solace for his spirit, still suffering sorely from the cruel treatment he had received—from a double disappointment to his affection and his love. So long as he remained in



England amid its *souvenirs* and scenes, these sad memories would ever remain fresh. Perhaps in a foreign land, with strange objects under his eye, strange voices sounding in his ear, he might be enabled to realise the truth of the oft-quoted adage, "Absence conquers love."

CHAPTER XV.

A SKETCHER SURPRISED.

ON the road to Rome, leading out into the Campagna, a young man might have been seen wending his way towards the hill country where shoot down the spurs of the Apennines. At a glance he was not an Italian. A fine open face, with cheeks of ruddy hue, curls caressing them, of a rich auburn colour; but, above all, a frame of strong, almost herculean, build, borne forward by a free unfettered step, pronounced a son of the north—a Saxon! A portfolio under his arm, a palette carried in his left hand alongside, some half-dozen camel's-brushes, clearly proclaimed his profession—a painter in search of a subject.

There was nothing in all this to attract the

attention of those he met or passed upon the route—neither the personal appearance of the painter nor the paraphernalia that declared his calling. An artist on the roads around Rome is an entity that may be often encountered—though perhaps not so often as a bandit.


If any one took notice of the individual in question, it was merely to remark that he was a stranger—*un Inglese*—and perhaps wonder why he was trudging out towards the hills, while he might be enjoying himself ten times better in the cabarets and inns of the Eternal City.

That the artist in question was "*Inglese*," no one who saw him doubted; nor will the reader, when told that he was no other than Henry Harding.

Why he was upon a Roman instead of an English road is already known. Flung upon his own resources in the great city of London—too proud to return to his father's home, stung by what he fancied to have been a

refusal to his last request—he had, under the tutelage of his Italian friend, now taken to painting as his profession. He had not stained canvas without some success—enough to justify him in following the advice of Luigi Torreani, and completing his studies under the bright skies of Italy, and amid the classic scenes of the seven-hilled city. Thither had he found his way, with no other support than the precarious earnings of his pencil. This was fully evidenced by his threadbare coat and chafed *chaussure*, as he trudged afoot along the dusty road of the Romagna.

Whither was he going? He was far enough out to have almost lost sight of the Eternal City, and those classic monuments that only give proof of its decay. These, one would think, should have been the objects of his study—the subjects upon which to perfect it. And so they had been. He had painted them one after another—portal and palace, sculptured figure and fresco, Capitol and Coliseum—till his head was tired with such art delineation.



tion ; and he was now on his way to the hills, to drink from the pure fountain of Nature—to fling rock and stream and tree upon the canvas, under the light of an Italian sun, and the canopy of an azure sky.

It was his first journey to the Campagna ; he was going without a guide, only inquiring now and then for Valdiorno, a small mountain town lying near the Neapolitan frontier. To the “ *sindico* ” of this place he carried a letter of introduction, obtained from his son, who was the young Italian artist he had left behind him in London. But the chief object of this country excursion was to find some scene *paintable*, and worthy of being painted.

He had not made many miles along his route before he was tempted to stop, and this more than once. Every turn of the road presented him with a landscape ; every peasant would have made a picture. He resisted these allurements with the thought, that these landscapes, so near to the city, might all have been sketched before ; while the peasants

could be caught at any time, in the streets of Rome itself, and there painted in all their picturesqueness.

On towards some shaggy hills he saw looming out in the distance; and on went he, until near the close of the day he found himself toiling up a steep ravine, whose every turn gave him a tableau worthy of being transferred to canvas, framed, and conspicuously suspended against the walls of the Royal Academy.

After a slight repast drawn from his wallet, and a smoke from his meerschaum pipe, he set about painting a scene, he had at length selected. He fought against the fatigue of his journey, for the sake of catching a magnificent mellow sunset that had welcomed his approach to the place. He had no need to add to the "composition" of his picture. Rocks, trees, cliffs, torrents foaming over them, points of *chiaro* and *oscuro*, abruptly contrasted—all were under his eye. If there was aught wanting to give life to the landscape, it was only a few

figures—animal or human—and these he could fill in according to his fancy.

“Ah,” he reflected aloud, “just the scene for a band of brigands. I’d give something to have a half-dozen of them in the foreground. I could then make a picture of these fantastic Turpins drawn from real life—a thing, I take it, which has never been done before. That would be something to hang up in the Royal Academy—something worth wasting colour and canvas on. I’d give——”

“How much?” answered a voice that seemed to issue out of the rocks behind him. “How much would you give, Master Painter, for that you speak o’? If you bid high enough, I dare say I mout find the means o’ accommodatin’ you.”

Along with the voice came the footsteps of a man—not in soft, stealthy tread, as of one approaching unawares, but with a quick thump, as the man himself dropped down from a rock above upon the little platform where the artist had planted his sticks. The latter looked up,

at first in surprise, then rather in pleased admiration. He was thinking only of his art, and before him stood the very model of his imagination—a man clad in a complete suit of plush and coloured velvet, breeched, bandaged, and belted, with a plumed hat upon his head, and a short carbine across his arms—in costume and caparison the beau-ideal of a brigand. Two things alone hindered him from appearing the true heroic type of stage representation, such as we are accustomed to see in “Mazzaroni” and the “Devil’s Brother.” There was a broad Saxon face, and a tongue unmistakably from the shire of Somerset. Both were so marked, that but for the velveteen knee-breeches, the waist-belt, the elaborately buttoned vest, and the plumed hat upon his head, Henry Harding might have thought himself at home, and in the presence of a man he had met before.

Ere the young artist had sufficiently recovered from his surprise to respond to the unexpected salutation, the picturesque stranger continued—

“Want to paint brigands, do ye? Well, there’s a chance for ye now. The band’s close by. Jess wait a bit; I’ll call ’em down. Hey, there, captin!” he cried, changing his English to Italian, “ye may come on. It’s only one o’ them poor devils o’ daubers from the city. He wants to take our likenesses. I s’pose you’ve no objection to his doin’ it?”

Before the painter could make response, or remove his paraphernalia out of the way, the ledge he had selected for his “point of view” was crowded with figures—one and all of them so picturesquely attired, that had they stood in the Corso, or elsewhere within police protection, he would have been only too delighted to have painted them with the most Pre-Raphaelitish detail. As it was, all thoughts of art were chased out of his mind. He saw that he was encircled by banditti!

To attempt to retreat was out of the question. They were above, below, on all sides of him. Even had he been swifter than any of the gang, their carbines were slung handy *en ban-*

doulière ; and a volley from these would certainly have checked his flight. There was no alternative but to resign himself to his fate—which was now to be made a captive.




CHAPTER XVI.

EMPTY POCKETS.

IF he who had surprised the painter at his task did not present the exact classic type of the stage bandit, there was one upon the ground who did. This man stood a little in advance of the others with that easy air that betokened authority. There was no mistaking his position. He was the chief. His dress did not differ, in cut or fashion, so materially from that of his followers ; it was only more costly in the material. Where their breeches were velveteen, his was of the finest silk velvet. Besides, there was a glitter about his arms and a sparkle on the clasp which held the plume in his Calabrian hat that bespoke real jewellery. His face, moreover, was not of the common

cast ; it was of the true Roman type, the nose and chin of exceeding prominence, with a broad oval jaw-bone indicative of determination. He might have been deemed handsome but for an expression of ferocity—animal, almost brutal—that gleamed and sparkled in his coal-black eyes. If not handsome, he was sufficiently striking, and Henry Harding might have fancied himself confronted by the renowned Fra Diavolo. Had he stepped from behind the proscenium of the scenic stage, or come bounding from a “back flat,” the Transpontine spectators would have hailed him as the hero they had come to the theatre to see.

For some seconds there was silence. The first spokesman had slunk into the rear of the band ; and all stood waiting for the chief to commence speech or action. The latter stood looking at the young artist, scanning him from head to foot. The scrutiny seemed to give him no great pleasure. There was not much booty to be expected in the pockets of such a threadbare coat ; and a grin passed over his



dark features as he pronounced, in a contemptuous tone, the word—

“*Artista?*”

“*Si, Signore,*” replied the artist, with as much *sang froid* as if he had been answering an ordinary question. “At your service, if you wish to sit or stand for your portrait.”

“Portrait? Bah! What care I for your chalks and ochres, signor painter? Better if you’d been a pedlar with a good fat pack. That’s the sort of toys for such as we. You’re from the *cittada*? What’s brought you up here?”

“My legs,” replied the young Englishman, thinking that a bold front might be best under the circumstances.

“*Cospetto!* I can tell that without asking. Such boots as yours don’t look much like the stirrup. But come, declare yourself. What have you got in your pockets; a scudi or two, I suppose. How much, *signore*?”

“Three scudi.”

“Hand them over.”

"Here they are—you are welcome to them."

The brigand took the three coins, with as much nonchalance as if he had been receiving them in liquidation for some service rendered.

"This all?" he asked, again surveying the artist from head to foot.

"All I have got upon me."

"But you have more in the *cittada*?"

"A little more."

"How much?"

"About four score scudi."

"*Corpo di Bacco!* a good sum; where is it lying?"

"At my lodgings."

"Your landlord can lay hands upon it?"

"He can by breaking open my box."

"Good! now write out an order giving him authority to break open the box and send you the money. Some paper, Giovanni. Your ink-horn, Giacomo. Here, signor *artista*, write."

Seeing that it would be useless to make objection, the artist consented.

"Stay!" cried the brigand, arresting his

pen; "you have something besides money at your lodgings? You Ingleses always carry about a stock of loose property. I include them in the requisition."

"There is not much to include. Another suit of clothes, but a trifle better than these you see on my back. A score or two of sketches—half-finished paintings—which you wouldn't value even if the last touch had been given them."

"Ha, ha!" laughed the brigand, his comrades joining in the laugh. "You're a good judge of character, signor *artista*. You can keep your sketches and your spare suit too, neither of which commodities would be likely to suit our market. Write, then, for the scudi."

Again the artist was about to use the pen.

"Hold!" once more exclaimed the bandit. "You have friends in the *cittada*. What a mistake I was making not to think of them! They can give something towards your ransom."

"I have not a friend in Rome; at least not one who would pay five scudi to rescue me from a rope."

"Bah! you are jesting, signore."

"I am speaking the simple truth."

"If that be so," said the brigand, who seemed to melt a little at mention of the rope, "If that be so," he added reflectingly, "then—ah, we shall see. Hark you, signor painter, if what you say be true, you may sleep in your own lodgings to-night. If false, you will spend your night here in the hills, and perhaps minus your ears. You understand me!"

"I should be dull not to do so."

"*Buono—buono!* And now one word of warning. Let there be no trickery in what you write—no deception in what you say. The messenger who carries your letter to the *cittada* will learn all about you—even to the quality of your spare suit and the value of your pictures. If you have friends he will find them out. If not, he will know it. And,

by the Virgin, if it turn out that you are playing with us, your ears shall answer for it!"

"So be it. I accept the conditions."

"Enough! Write on."

As dictated, the requisition was written. The sheet of paper was folded, sealed with a piece of pitch, and directed to the landlord of the lodgings in which the English artist had set up his studio.

A man, in the garb of a peasant of the Campagna, was selected from the band; and, charged with the strange missive, at once despatched along the road that led towards the Eternal City.


After kicking down the temporary easel which our artist had erected, and pitching his slight sketch into the torrent below, the brigands commenced their march up the mountain—their captive keeping them company, with no very pleasant anticipation in regard to the treatment that might be in store for him.

CHAPTER XVII.

AN UNLUCKY RECOGNITION.

YOU are astonished at the young Englishman taking things so coolly? To be captured by Italian bandits, famed for their ferocity, is not a trifling affair. And yet so Henry Harding seemed to consider it.

The explanation is simple, and easily intelligible. At any other period he might not only have chafed at his captivity, but felt fear for the consequences. Just then he was suffering from two other sorrows, that made this seem light—to be scarcely considered at all. His disinheritance by his father was still fresh in his mind—still bitter; but far more bitter the rejection by his sweetheart.



Tortured by these cruel memories of the past, he recked less of what befell him either in the present or the future. There was even a time when he would have courted such a distraction—during the first few weeks after his departure from home. Twelve months had since elapsed, and close application to his art had to some extent consoled him. Perhaps absence had done more than art—of which he was by no means passionately fond; for he was not one of the thorough enthusiasts who prate about the divine inspiration of painters. Chance alone had guided him to this profession, as the only means he could devise for earning his daily bread—chance, partly directed by taste, and partly by some previous study of his school-days. So far it had served his purpose, and, enabling him to visit Rome, he had there imbibed a certain ambition to excel in it—enough to soften, though not obliterate, the memory of his misfortunes. This was still keen enough to make him reckless of what might turn up; hence his cool

demeanour in the presence of the bandits, at which you may have felt surprise.

Up the mountains they marched him, by one of those execrable roads common in the Papal States, kept, no doubt, in better condition in the time of the Cæsars than at the present day.

He speculated but little on whither he was being taken. Of course to some forest lair, some mountain cavern, used as a bandits' den. He was not without curiosity to see such a place; and perhaps it was passing through his thoughts, that at some future day he might avail himself of his present experience to paint a bivouac of brigands from real life.


He was very much surprised when a good-sized village came in sight; still more so on seeing the bandits march boldly into it; but his surprise became astonishment when he saw them unsling their carbines, rest them against the walls of the houses, and make other preparations denoting their intention to pass the night in the place!

The villagers appeared to have little dread



of them. On the contrary, many of the men joined them in their wine-drinking, while some of the women rather encouraged than resented their rude sallies. Even the long-robed priest of the village passed to and fro amongst them, distributing crosses and benedictions ; for all of which the brigands paid him in coin, that had no doubt been taken from the pockets of some unfortunate traveller—perhaps one of his own sacred cloth !

It certainly was a scene of sufficient originality to interest the eyes of a stranger, that stranger an artist ; and the young Englishman, as he gazed upon it, for a time forgot that he was a captive. Of this he was reminded as night drew near. Hitherto his captors had not even taken the precaution to tie him. His frank acceptance of the situation, with his apparent indifference to it, had led the chief to think lightly about his making an attempt to escape. Besides, it could not much matter. Before he could reach Rome the sham peasant would have been to his



lodgings and rifled the chest of its contents. The scudi would, at all events, be safe; and beyond these the brigand had formed no very sanguine expectations. It was not likely there were rich friends, or any chance of a ransom. The well-worn wardrobe of the painter spoke against such an hypothesis.

Rather in obedience to habit and usage, than for any other reason, did his captors determine to tie him up for the night; and just as the sun was sinking into the Tyrrhenian sea, two men were seen approaching the place where he had been left, provided with a rope for this purpose. In one of these he recognised the man who had first saluted him on the platform. He had not forgotten the conversation that had passed between them, nor the tongue in which it had been carried on. That being English, the bandit himself must be an Englishman, as was also evident from his bright skin, hay-coloured hair, and broad blank face, so unlike the sharp-featured, dark-visaged gentry who surrounded him.

Though at first not a little astonished at encountering a countryman in such a place, and especially in such showy guise, so different from the dull smock-frock the man had once evidently worn, he had ceased for a time to think of him. Since their first meeting he had not come in contact with him. The fellow appeared to be amongst the least considered of the band, only permitted prominence when called up by his chief, and since the capture his services had not been required. He was just such a man as one could hardly see without thinking of rope ; and armed with a coil of this, he now approached to execute the order of the "captin." So said he as he stopped in front of the prisoner, and commenced uncoiling the cord.

It was the first time Henry Harding had been threatened with the degradation of being bound. To an Englishman, these is something disagreeable in the very idea of it ; but to a young gentleman lately the presumed heir to £50,000, and who had never known a more


irksome restriction than the statutes of Eton and Oxford, there was something repulsive in the prospect. At first he indignantly refused to submit to his wrists being corded, protesting that there was no need for it. He had no intention of attempting to escape. He would stay with the brigands till morning, or the morning after that—any time till the messenger returned. Besides, they had promised him liberty, on conditions that would be kept on his side, and he hoped on theirs.

His remonstrances were in vain.

“Dom conditions,” roughly replied the man occupied in getting ready the rope; “we know nothin’ ’bout them. Our business is to bind ye; them’s the orders of the captin.”

And so saying, he proceeded to carry them out.

It looked hopeless enough; but still there might be a chance in an appeal to the feelings of a countryman. The captive determined on making trial of it.



"You are an Englishman?" he said in his most conciliatory tone.

"I've beed one," gruffly answered the bandit.

"I hope you still are."

"I'deed, do ye? What matters that to you?"

"I am one myself."

"Who the devil says you ain't? D'ye take me for a fool not to see it in yer face, and hear it in the cursed lingo that I'd hope never to lissen to again?"

"Come, my good fellow; it's not often that an Englishman——"


"Stash yer palaver, dang yer! an' don't 'good fellow' me! Spread yer wrists now, an' get 'em ready for the rope. Just because you're English I'll tie 'em all the tighter—daang me if I don't!"

Perceiving that remonstrance was thrown away upon the renegade ruffian, and that resistance would only lead to ill-treatment, the young Englishman extended his hands to be tied. The bandit seized hold of him by both wrists, and commenced twisting them so as to

turn them back to back. The moment his eyes rested on the left hand—upon the little finger showing a red longitudinal scar—he dropped both as if they had been bars of hot iron, at the same time starting backwards with a cry. It was a cry that betokened recognition, mingled with malignant joy!

The surprise which this occasioned to the captive was followed by another springing from a different cause. He, too, had effected a recognition. In the brutal brigand before him, he identified the ex-gamekeeper, poacher, and murderer—Doggy Dick!

“Ho! ho!” cried the latter, dancing over the ground like one who had gone frantic from receiving news of some unexpected fortune. “Ho! ho! You it be, Muster Henry Hardin’! Who would ’a expected te find you here among the mountains o’ Italy i’stead o’ the Chiltern Hills, where ye were so snug an’ comfortable! An’ wi’ such a poor coat upon yer back! Why, what ha’ become o’ the old General, an’ his big property—the park,



the farms, the woods, the covers, and the pheasants? Ah! the pheasants! You remember them, don't ye? And so do I too. So do Doggy Dick—daangd well!"

As the renegade said this, a grin of diabolical significance made itself perceptible on his otherwise inexpressive features. Henry Harding perceived it, but made no remark. He knew that words would be of no use.

"I dar' say Nigel, that sweet half-brother o' yours, has got 'em all—the park, and the farms, and the woods, and the covers, and the pheasants. Ah! and I'd take my affedavy o' 't he's got that showy gal—she you were so sweet upon, Muster Henry. She warn't likely to cotton to a man wi' such a coat on his back as you have on yourn. Why, it look like it had come out o' a pawn-shop!"

By this time the blood of the Hardings had got up to boiling point. Despite his stupidity, Doggy Dick perceived it. He saw that he had gone too far in his provocation, and regretted having done so, before making fast the

hands of him he had provoked. He would have retreated, but it was too late. Before he could turn, Henry Harding's left hand was upon his throat, the scarred finger pressing upon his larynx, and with the right he received a blow on his skull that felled him to the ground, like an ox under the stroke of a pole-axe.

In an instant the young Englishman was surrounded by the bandits and their wine-bibbing associates. Half-a-score flung themselves simultaneously upon him. He was soon overpowered, bound hand and foot, and then beaten in his bonds—some of the village damsels clapping their hands, and by their cries applauding the conquest of brute strength over injured innocence.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A SYMPATHISER.

THERE was one who witnessed the scene with a sympathising heart. It is almost superfluous to say that it was a woman ; for no man in that community would have dared to take side against the brigands. While in it, these ruffians were complete masters of the place, and out of it their authority was little less. Their den was not distant, and on any day they could descend upon the unprotected town, and vent it with the torch of destruction.

The woman who sympathised with the young Englishman was still only a girl ; and although a daughter of the *sindico*, or chief magistrate, of the place, she could do nothing to rescue him from his persecutors. Even the

intermittent authority exercised by her father would have been unavailing; and her sympathy for the stranger only existed in the secret recesses of her heart.

Standing in a balcony of what appeared the best house in the village, she presented a picture that may be seen only in a town of the Roman Campagna—a combination of those antique classic graces which we associate with the days of Lucretia. Beauty of the most striking type, innocence of aspect that betokened the most perfect purity, and below, a street crowded with striding Tarquins!

She looked like a solitary lamb in the midst of a conglomeration of wolves, feebly shepherded by her father and the village priest—by the Law and the Church, both on the last legs of a decadent authority.

It was a singular picture to contemplate; nor had it escaped the notice of the young Englishman.

The girl had been observed in the balcony ever since his arrival; and as her position was

not very far from the place where the brigands had permitted him to take a seat, he had a fair view of her, and could note her every action. He could see that she was not accosted like the commoner maidens of the village; but, for all this, bold glances were occasionally given to her, and brutal jests uttered within her hearing. She had looked towards the captive, and he at her, until more than once their eyes had met; and he fancied that in hers he could read signs of a sympathetic nature. It may have been but pity for his forlorn situation, but it was pity that expressed itself in a most pleasing way.

While gazing on that dark Italian girl, he thought of Belle Mainwaring; but never, during the whole period of his self-exile, had he thought of her with less pain. As he continued to gaze he felt a strange solace stealing over his thoughts, and which he could only account for by the humiliation caused by his captivity—by a sorrow of the present expelling a sorrow of the past. Some-

thing whispered him that the relief might be more than temporary, he could not tell why. He only knew, or thought, that if he could be permitted to look long enough into the eyes of that Roman maiden he might think of Belle Mainwaring with a calmer spirit—perhaps forget her altogether. In that hour of imprisonment he was happier than he had been for the past twelve months of free, unfettered life. From the contemplation of that fair form, posed in the balcony above him, he had, in one hour, drawn more inspiration than from all the statues seen in the Eternal City.

One thing interfered with his newly-sprung happiness. He observed that the girl only looked upon him with glances of stealth ; that the moment their eyes met, hers were quickly withdrawn. This might have gratified him all the more, but that he had discovered the cause. He saw that she was under surveillance. Had it been her father who was watching her there would have been nothing to cause him pain. But it was not. The

eyes that seemed so vigilantly bent upon her were those of the bandit chief; who, wine-cup in hand, sat outside the little inn, with his face constantly turned towards the house of the *sindico*.

The young girl seemed uneasy under his glances, and at length retired from the balcony. She came out again at the noise caused by the binding of the captive.

In the midst of the *mélée* Henry Harding had his eyes upon her even after he was bound and beaten. He bore all this the better from the glances she gave him. They seemed to say—

“I would spring down into the street and rush to your rescue, but my doing so might be the sealing of your doom.”

So construed he the expression upon her face—a construction that imparted pleasure, but was also accompanied by a painful reflection.

* * * * *

The shadows of night descended over the town. There were no street lamps, and the

graceful shape in the balcony, gradually blending with the gloom, became lost to Henry Harding's eyes. The bandits had entered the inn, where they were joined by the more *bizarre* of the village belles. Soon came forth the sound of stringed instruments, the violin and the mandolin, mingled with the treading and shuffling of feet. Occasionally loud talking could be heard, along with the clinking of cups; then came cursing and quarrels, one of which terminated in a street-fight and the shedding of blood.

All this the young Englishman heard or saw from the place where he had been left bound—outside the open window of the inn. He was not there alone. Two bandits stood sentry over him, watching him with a vigilance in strange contrast with the negligence before displayed. The captive took note of this change in the behaviour of the brigands towards him. Still more when the chief, staggering past at a late hour, addressed some words to the two men who had him in charge.

He could hear what was said. It was in the form of an injunction, terminating in a threat to the effect, that if he, the prisoner, should not be forthcoming the next day, they, the sentries, might expect punishment of the severest kind—in short, they would be shot. So hiccuped out their intoxicated chief, as he went reeling away in company of one of the flaunting belles who had taken part in the bandits' ball.

That it was no empty threat made under the influence of drink became evident to the captive, in the increased vigilance with which he was tended. As soon as their chief was out of sight, the two sentries made a fresh examination of his fastenings, re-tightened the cords wherever they had become loose, and added others for greater security. Skilled in this peculiar craft by long practice, their prisoner was left but little chance of releasing himself, had he been ever so much inclined towards making the attempt.

And now he was, if he had not been be-

fore, not only inclined, but eagerly desirous, of making his escape. The stringent orders of the chief, with the elaborate precautions taken by the two sentries, had naturally awakened within him a degree of apprehension. Such pains would scarce have been taken for the sake of merely keeping him all night and letting him free in the morning. Moreover, the messenger who had been sent to the city had already returned. He had seen the man go into the inn while the dance was in progress, and no doubt he had delivered his fourscore scudi to the chief. It could not be this that was waited for to obtain his delivery.

There was to be another chapter added to his imprisonment—perhaps some cruel torture in store for him. He could easily imagine this after the incident that had occurred while he was being bound. The knock-down blow given to Doggy Dick would be looked upon as an insult to the whole band, and little as that English renegade might be esteemed by his Italian comrades, he would still have sufficient

influence to instigate them to hostility against their captive. This was the cause to which Henry Harding ascribed the altered treatment he was receiving, and he now regretted having given it.

Could he have guessed the true reason he might have spared himself all self-recrimination. The prolonged imprisonment before him—and such in reality there was—had for motive a scheme far deeper than the hostility of Doggy Dick—either on account of the conflict that had occurred between them, or that of older and earlier date. It was a scheme likely for a long time not only to keep the captive from being restored to liberty, but that might deprive him of his life.

Though apprehensive of receiving some severe castigation at the hands of the brigands, he still did not believe himself to be in any great danger; and he was hindered from sleeping less by the prospect of punishment, than the pain caused by the cords too tightly drawn around his limbs. Despite this, de-

spite his hard couch, which was the stone pavement of the street, he at length fell asleep ; and slept on till the crowing of the village cocks, aided by a kick from one of the brigand sentries, aroused him once more to a consciousness of his uncomfortable situation.

CHAPTER XIX.

ON THE MARCH.

AT daybreak the brigands were upon the march. The town where they had spent the night was not one of their safe places. They might halt there for a day, or a night, and refresh or amuse themselves ; but a prolonged stay in it might subject them to a surprise by the Papal troops, when these chanced to be on the alert. This was only upon occasions when some unusual outrage committed by the bandits called the troops forth to make a *feint* at chastising them.

Something of the kind was just then reported upon the *tapis*. He who had gone to rifle the chest of the poor artist had brought back word of it. Hence their quick decampment.

When the villagers made their appearance upon the street, they could congratulate one another on a happy riddance of their ruffian guests; though there were some among them to whom this would be no satisfaction—the keepers of the wine-shops for example. To them robbers' gold was as good as any other.

The band proceeded through the hills, evidently making homeward. They were already laden with booty, captured before they had fallen in with the artist. It was, in fact, the report of this foray that was tempting the troops to pursue them.

They had no prisoners—only plunder, in the shape of plate, jewellery, trinkets, and other light personal effects. The *villa di campagna* of some old Roman noble had been the scene of their late raid, and they were carrying the spoils to their den.

That this was in some secluded part of the country was evident from the road taken to reach it. Now it was a rough causeway traversing a ridge; anon a mere *scorzo*, or cattle-

track, zigzagging through the hills, or following the bed of a rivulet.

Long before reaching the end of their journey, the captive was fatigued and footsore. His shoes, none of the strongest, had yielded to the abrasion of the sharp stones; while the long tramp of the preceding day, with a half sleepless night on the street pavement, to say nothing of the beating the brutes had given him, had but ill prepared him for such an irksome march. His hands, too, were tied behind his back; and this, spoiling his balance, made progress still more difficult and disagreeable. The terrible depression of his spirits also detracted from his strength.

He had good reason for being dispirited. The rigorous watch, kept upon him all along the route, told him that he was not going to be easily let off. Already the brigands had broken faith with him; for he knew that the courier had come back, and of course brought back the scudi along with him.

Once only had he an opportunity of talking

to the chief, just before starting away from the village. He reminded him of his promise.

"You have released me," cried the ruffian, with a savage oath.

"In what way?" innocently asked the young Englishman.

"*Hola !* how simple you are, *Signor Inglese !* You forget the blow you gave to one of my band."

"The renegade deserved it."

"I shall be judge of that. By our laws your life is forfeit. With us it is blow for blow."

"In that case I should be absolved. Your fellows gave me twenty for one—good measure, as I can tell by my aching ribs."

"Bah !" contemptuously rejoined the bandit, "be satisfied that it is no worse with you. Thank the Virgin you're still alive ; or perhaps you may come nearer the mark by thanking that scar upon your little finger."

The look with which these last words were accompanied spoke of some secret meaning.

The captive could not tell what it was ; but it gave him food for reflection that lasted him for some time after. Taken in connection with the close watch kept upon him, he could forbode no good from it. On the contrary, there was evil in the innuendo, though of what sort it was beyond his intelligence to discover.

On the second day from their leaving the town, the march continued on through a mountainous country, most of it covered with forest. The track was rougher and more difficult to travel—at times ascending slopes almost precipitous, at others winding through clefts of rock so narrow as only to admit the passage of one at a time.


Both brigands and captive suffered from thirst ; which they were at length enabled to quench with the snow found upon the colder exposure of the ridges.

Just before sunset a halt was made, and one of the bandits was sent forward as a scout. A mountain summit, shaped like a truncated cone, was seen a short distance

in front, and towards this the path appeared tending.

About twenty minutes after the scout had disappeared from view, the howl of a wolf came back from the direction in which he had gone, while another similar cry was heard still farther off. Following this, there was the bleating of a goat; on hearing which the brigands once more resumed their march.

Rounding an angle of rock, the face of the conical hill was seen from base to top, scarred by a deep ravine that led to its summit. Up this lay the path, until the highest point was reached; then a strange picture lay spread before the eye of the captive. He was looking down into a cup-like hollow, nearly circular in shape, with sloping sides, covered with a thin growth of timber, in places packed into groves. At the bottom there was a pond of water, and not far from its edge, through the trees, some patches of grey wall, with smoke rising above, declared the presence of human habitation. It was the rendezvous of the bandits, which they



reached just before the going down of the sun.

Their home, then, was no cave, no mere lair, but something that more resembled a hamlet or village. Two or three of the houses were substantial structures of stone; the rest were simple *pagliatti*, or straw huts, such as are common in the remote mountain districts of the Italian peninsula. A forest of beech trees overshadowed the group, while the ridges around were covered with a thick growth of ilex and pine. A deep, dark tarn glistened in the centre, looking like some long-extinct crater, that acted as a reservoir for the rain and melted snow from the surrounding slope.

The stone houses could never have been built by the bandits. The straw cabins may have been erected to afford them additional accommodation; but the more substantial dwellings told of times long gone by, before the enervating influence of a despotic government had brought decay upon the territory of Italia. Some miner, perhaps, who extracted

ore from the neighbouring mountains, had found here a convenient smelting-place in proximity to the tarn.

Around, the land sloped up into a circular ridge—a sort of amphitheatre, with apparently two passes leading outward—one to the north, the other to the south. By both of these passes was a peak that rose bald and herbless above the fringe of the forest, and on each of these, close to the extreme summit, could be seen the figure of a man, visible only from the valley below. They were the bandits' pickets upon their post. Now and then, as they changed attitude, their accoutrements and carbine-barrels could be seen glancing in the golden sunset.

The young Englishman noted all this as he stood in the open piazza of the robber quarters. It recalled the song of the famed Fra Diavolo, and a night at Her Majesty's Theatre—his box shared by Belle Mainwaring.

He was not long allowed to indulge in such reminiscences—at least in the open air. Acting

under orders from the chief, two of his captors conducted him into a dark chamber in one of the stone houses ; and, giving him a push that almost sent him face forward upon the floor, closed the door behind him.

There was the harsh grating of a bolt, and then all was silence. For the first time in his life, Henry Harding felt the sensation of being inside a prison !

CHAPTER XX.

WRITING TO DICTATION.

THERE was at least relief in being left alone. The captive artist felt it so much, that his gaolers had scarcely drawn the key from out the lock, when he stretched himself along the floor and fell fast asleep. Some fern-leaves strewn over the stones served him for a couch, though he was too tired to care much for this.

He did not wake until sunlight, shooting in through the window, fell slanting upon his face. Then he rose to his feet, and took a survey of his chamber. A glance convinced him that he was inside the cell of a prison ; for whatever may have been the original design of the room, its adaptability to this purpose was at once apparent. The window was high

above the level of the floor, and so narrow that a cat could barely have passed through it. Besides, there was a strong bar set vertically into the sill, that rendered egress absolutely impossible. The door was alike forbidding; and ten minutes' contemplation of the place told the prisoner there was no chance of escape—save in the corruptibility of his gaolers.

To Henry Harding there was no hope of this, and he did not even think of it. He saw no alternative but to wait the development of events.

He was hungry, and would have eaten anything. He listened, in hopes of hearing a footstep—the tread of a brigand bringing him his breakfast. He could hear a step; but it was that of the sentry outside his door. It came and went, and came and went again, but no sound of drawing bolt, or key turning in the lock. An hour was passed in this hungry uncertainty, and then the tread of the sentry became commingled with other footsteps. A short parley outside, the key was inserted,

the bolt clicked back, and the door stood open.

“Good mornin’, Muster Hardin’. I hope ye ha’ passed a pleasant night o’t. Compliments o’ captin, an’ wants ye to come an’ see him.”

Without further speech Doggy Dick seized the prisoner by the collar. Then, with a spiteful shake, such as might have been given by an irate policeman, dragged him out of the cell, and on toward the quarters of the bandit chief. As a matter of course, these were in the best house of the place; but the young artist was not prepared to witness such splendour inside. Not only was the furniture well made, but there were articles of *luxé* in abundance—plate, pictures, looking-glasses, clocks, girandoles, epergnes, and the like, not very artistically arranged, but plenteous everywhere. It was a somewhat grotesque admixture of the ancient and modern, such as may be seen in a curiosity-shop, or the chambers of a London money-lender.

In the apartment to which the prisoner was

introduced, there were two individuals seated amidst the glittering confusion. One was the brigand chief, whose name he now knew for the first time to be "Corvino." He knew it from hearing him so addressed by the other occupant of the chamber, who was a woman, and who in her turn was called by the chief "Cara Popetta"—the "Cara" being merely a prefix of endearment.

Corvino, the chief, has been already delineated. Popetta, as being his spouse, also deserves a word. She was a large woman, nearly as tall as Corvino himself, and quite as picturesquely attired. Her dress was glittering with beads and bugles; and with her dark, almost chestnut-coloured skin and crow-black hair, she would have passed muster among the belles of an Indian encampment. She had once been beautiful, and her teeth were still so, when displayed in a smile; otherwise, they resembled the incisors of a tigress preparing to spring upon her prey. The beauty that had once shone in her countenance might still to

some extent have remained—for Cara Popetta was scarce turned thirty—but for a scar of cadaverous hue, that traversed the left cheek. This turned what was once a fair face into one disfigured, even to ugliness. And if her eyes spoke truth, many a cicatrice had equally deformed her soul, for as she sat eyeing the prisoner on his entrance, there was that in her aspect that might have caused him to quail.

Just then he had no opportunity for scanning her very minutely. On the instant of his stepping inside the room he was accosted by the chief, and commanded in a hard tone to take a seat by the table.

“I need not ask you if you can write, signor *artista*,” said the bandit, pointing to the “materials” upon the table. “Such a skilled hand as you with the pencil cannot fail to be an adept with the pen. Take hold of one of these, and set down what I indite—translating it, as I know you can, into your native tongue. Here is a sheet of paper that will serve for the purpose.”

As he said this, the brigand stretched forth his hand, and pointed to some letter-paper already spread out upon the table.

The prisoner took up the pen, without having the least idea of what was to be the subject of his first essay at secretaryship. Apparently it was to be a letter, but to whom was it to be written? He was not long kept in ignorance.

"The address first," commanded the brigand.

"To whom?" asked the young Englishman making ready to write.

"*Al Signor Generale Harding!*" dictated the bandit.

"To General Harding!" translated Henry, dropping the pen and starting up from his seat. "My father! What know you of him?"

"Enough, signor *pittore*, for my purpose. Sit down again, and write what I dictate. That is all I want of you."

Thus commanded, the artist resumed his seat; and once more taking up the pen, wrote the address thus dictated. As he did so, he thought of the last time he had penned the

same words, when directing that angry letter from the roadside inn near to his father's park. He had no time to give way to reminiscences, for the bandit exhibited great impatience to have the letter completed.


"*Padre caro!*" was the next phrase that required translation.

Again the secretary hesitated. Again went his memory back to the writing from the English inn, where he had commenced that letter without the prefix "Dear." Was he now to use it at the dictation of a brigand?

The command was peremptory. The bandit, chafing at the delay, repeated it with a menace. His captive could only obey, and down went the words "Dear Father."

"And now," said Corvino, "continue your translation; don't stop again. Another interruption may cost you your ears."

This was said in a tone that told the speaker was in earnest. Of course, in the face of such a terrible alternative, the young artist could do no less than continue the writing of the



letter to its end. When translated into his own tongue, it ran as follows :—

“DEAR FATHER,—

“This is to inform you that I am a prisoner in the mountains of Italy, about forty miles from the city of Rome, and upon the borders of the Neapolitan territory. My captors are stern men, and, if I be not ransomed, will kill me. They only wait till I can hear from you ; and for this purpose they send a messenger to you, *upon whose safety while in England my life will depend*. If you should cause him to be arrested, or otherwise hindered from returning here, they will retaliate upon me by a torture too horrible to think of. As the amount of my ransom, they demand thirty thousand scudi—about five thousand pounds. If the bearer bring this sum back with him in gold—a circular note on the Bank of Rome will do—they promise me my liberty ; and I know they will keep their promise, for these men, although forced

to become bandits by cruel persecution on the part of their government, have true principles of honesty and honour. If the money be not sent, then, dearest father, I can say with sad certainty, that you will never more see your son."

"Now sign your name to it," said the brigand, as the writing was completed.

Henry Harding once more started from his chair, and stood irresolute, still holding the pen in his hand. He had written the letter as dictated, and, while occupied in translating it into his native tongue, he had given but little heed to its true signification. But now he was called upon to append his name to this piteous appeal to his father. With the remembrance still vivid in his mind of the defiant epistle he had last penned to him, he felt something more than reluctance—he felt shame, and almost a determination to refuse.

"Sign your name!" commanded the brigand, half rising from his seat. "Sign it, I say!"

The young Englishman still hesitated.

“Lay down the pen again, without putting your *firma* to that letter, and, by the Holy Virgin, before the ink become dry, your blood will redden the floor at your feet. *Cospetto!* to be crossed by a poor devil of a *pittore*—a cur of an *Inglese!*”

“O signor,” interposed the brigand’s wife, who up to that moment had not spoken a word, “do as he bids you, *buono cavalière!* It is only his way with every one who strays here from the great city. Sign it *caro*, and all will be well. You will be free again, and can return to your friends.”

While delivering this appeal, Popetta had risen up from her chair, and laid her hand upon the Englishman’s shoulder. The tone in which she spoke, with a certain expression detectable in her fiery eyes, did not seem altogether to please her *sposo*, who, rushing round the table, seized hold of the woman and swung her to the farthest corner of the room.

“Stay there!” he shouted, “and don’t interfere with what’s no concern of yours.”

Then suddenly turning upon his prisoner, and drawing a pistol from his belt, he once more vociferated, "Sign !"

The obstinacy that would have resisted such an appeal could be only true foolhardiness—a reckless indifference to life. There could be no mistaking the intent of the robber, for the click of his cocked pistol sounded sharp in the captive's ear. For an instant the young Englishman, whose hands were for the time untied, thought of flinging himself upon his fierce antagonist and trying the chances of a struggle. But then outside there was Doggy Dick, with a score of others, ready to shoot him down in his first effort to escape. It was sheer madness to think of it. There was no alternative but to sign—at least none except dying upon the spot. The young artist was not inclined for this ; and, stooping over the table, he added to what he had already written, the name "Henry Harding."

Doggy Dick, styled "Signor Ricardo," was called in and asked if he could read.

"I beant much o' a scholard," replied the renegade, "but I dar' say I can make out that bit o' scribble."

The letter was slowly spelt over and pronounced "All right." It was then enveloped and directed, Doggy Dick giving the correct address. After which, the next duty this Amphitryon was called upon to perform was the retying of his captive, and transporting him back to his cell.

That same night the epistle, that had come so near costing Henry Harding his life, was despatched by the peasant messenger to Rome, thence to be forwarded by a postman of a different character and kind.

CHAPTER XXI.

UNDER THE CEDAR.

THE world had become just one year older from the day that Belle Mainwaring "refused" the young son of General Harding. The crake had returned to the cornfield, the cuckoo to the grove, and the nightingale once more filled the dells with its sweet nocturnal music.

As a tourist straying among the Chiltern Hills—with me almost an annual habit—I could perceive no change in their aspect. Nor did I find that much change had taken place in the "society" introduced in the early chapters of our story.

I met Miss Mainwaring at a private ball, that concluded an out-door archery meeting.

She was still the reigning belle of the neighbourhood, though there were two or three young sprouts that promised soon to dispossess her. There was less talk of her becoming a bride than had been twelve months before; though she was followed by a train of admirers that appeared to have suffered but slight diminution—Henry Harding being the only one missing from the muster. I heard that his place had been supplied by his brother Nigel; though this was only whispered to me in conjecture by one that was present at the gathering, where was also Nigel Harding himself. Knowing somewhat of the nature of this young gentleman, I did not believe it true, but, strange enough, before leaving the ground I had convincing evidence that it was so.

These summer fêtes, when extended into the night, afford wonderful opportunities for flirtation—far more than the winter ball-room. The promenade which occurs during the intervals of the dance may be extended out of doors, along the gravelled walks, or over the soft

grassy turf of the shrubbery. It is pleasant thus to escape from the heated air of the drawing-room—improvised for the night into a ball-room—especially pleasant when you take along with you your partner of the dance.

Strolling thus with one of the aforementioned maidens, I had halted by the side of a grand *Deodara*, whose drooping branches, palmately spread, swept the grass at our feet, forming around the trunk of the tree a tent-like canopy by day, by night a shadow of amorphous darkness. All at once a thought seemed to strike my companion.

“By the way,” said she, “I was wondering what I had done with my sunshade. Now I remember having left it under this very tree. You stay here,” she continued, disengaging herself from my arm, “while I go under and see if I can find it.”

“No,” said I, “permit me to go for it.”

“Nonsense,” replied my agile partner—she had proved herself such in the galop just ended—“I shall go myself. I know the exact

spot where I laid it—on one of the great roots. Never mind; you stand here.”

Saying this, she disappeared under the shadow of the *Deodara*.

I could not think of such a young creature venturing all alone into such a dismal-looking place; and, not heeding her remonstrance, I bent under the branches, and followed her in.

After groping about for some time, we failed to find the parasol.

“Some of the servants may have taken it into the house?” she said. “No matter. I suppose it will turn up along with my hat and cloak.”

We were about returning to the open lawn, when we saw coming, through the same break in the branches under which we had entered, a pair of promenaders like ourselves. *Their* errand we could not guess. Though ours had been innocent enough, it occurred to me that it might have a compromising appearance.

I cannot tell if my companion had the same

thought ; but, whether or no, we stood still, as if by a mutual instinct, waiting for the other pair to pass out again. We supposed they had stepped under the tree actuated by curiosity, or some other caprice that would soon be satisfied.

In this we were mistaken. Instead of immediately returning into the light, faint as it was, and only springing from the glimmer of a starlit sky, they stopped and entered into a conversation that promised to be somewhat protracted. At the first words, I could tell it was only the resumption of one that had already made some progress between them.

"I know," said the gentleman, "that you still bear *him* in your mind. It's no use telling me you never cared for him. I know better than that, Miss Mainwaring."

"Indeed, do you? What a wonderful knowledge you have, Mr. Nigel Harding! You know more than I ever did myself, and more than your brother did too ; else why should I have refused him. Surely that might

convince you there was nothing between us—at least, on my side there wasn't."

There was a short pause, as if the suitor was reflecting on what the lady had just said. My companion and I were puzzled as to what we should do. I knew it by the trembling of her arm, that spoke irresolution. By a similar sign I felt that we were agreed upon keeping silent, and hearing this strange dialogue to its termination. We had already heard enough to make discovering ourselves exceedingly awkward—to say nothing of our own compromising position. We kept our place then, standing still like a couple of linked statues.

"If that be true," rejoined Nigel Harding, who appeared to have brought his reasoning process to a satisfactory conclusion, "and if also true that no other has your heart, may I ask, Miss Mainwaring, why you do not accept the offer I have laid before you? You have told me—I think you have said as much—that you could like me for a husband. Why not go farther, and say you will have me?"

"Because—because—Mr. Nigel Harding,—do you really wish to know the reason?"

"If I did not, I should not have spent twelve months in asking—in pressing for it."

"If you promise to be a good boy, then I will tell you."

"I will promise anything. If it be a reason that I can remove, you may command me, and all the means in my power. My fortune—I won't speak of that—my life, my body, my soul, are all at your service."

The suitor spoke with a passionate enthusiasm I had not deemed him capable of.

"I shall be candid, then," was the response, half-whispered, "and tell you the exact truth. Two things stand between you and me, either of which may prevent us becoming man and wife. First, there is my mother's consent to be obtained; and without that I will not marry. To my dear mother I have given that promise—sworn it. Second, there is *your father's consent*; without it I *cannot* marry you. I have equally sworn to that—my

mother exacting the oath. Much, therefore, as I may like you, Nigel Harding, you know I cannot perjure myself. Come! we have talked of this too often. Let us return to the dancing, or our absence may be remarked."

Saying this, she swept out from beneath the branches.

The foiled suitor made no attempt to detain her. The conditions could not be answered, at least not then; and with a vague hope of being able at some future time to obtain better terms, he followed her back into the ball-room.

My companion and I, as soon as released, sauntered the same way. Not a word passed between us, as to what we had heard. To me it did not throw much new light either on the ways of the world or the character of Miss Mainwaring; but I could not help regretting the lesson of deception thus unavoidably communicated to the young creature on my arm, who might afterwards think of practising it on her own particular account!

CHAPTER XXII.

A QUEER TRAVELLER.

THE swells who diurnally take their departure for Windsor and the West were one afternoon, in the year 18—, called upon to use their eye-glasses upon a somewhat strange-looking traveller, who, coming from heaven knows where, made his appearance on the platform of the Paddington Station.

And yet there was nothing so very remarkable about the man—except on the Paddington platform. At London Bridge you might there have seen his like any day in the year: a personage of dark complexion, dressed in black, with a loose poncho-like garment hanging from his shoulders, and a hat upon his head,

half wide-awake, but tending toward a steeple-crown—in short, a “Calabrian.”

Such was the costume of the individual who had caused the raising of eye-glasses on the Paddington platform. In an instant they were down again, the object of supercilious attention having dissipated scrutiny by diving into the interior of a second-class carriage.

“Demmed queer-looking fella!” was the remark, and with this he was forgotten.

At Slough he appeared again upon that gloomiest of platforms, commanded by a station-master possessing the loudest voice upon all the G. W. R. line. The strange traveller did not show himself until the swells, such of them as stopped at Slough, had given up their tickets, and passed through the gate. Then, tumbling out of the carriage, the queer traveller, with a small portmanteau in his hand, placed himself in communication with the great Boanerges who directs the startings and departures at the Slough Station.

Between the two individuals thus acci-

dentally coming together there was a contrast so striking that the most careless loungeur on the platform could not have restrained himself from giving them attention. As they stood, *en rapport*, the very types of extremes—the negative and positive—the one a grand colossal form of true Saxon physiognomy, the other a diminutive specimen of Latinic humanity—for such the cloaked traveller appeared to be.

At the time, I myself chanced to be on the down platform, waiting for a down train. I was so struck with the tableau that I involuntarily drew nigh, to hear what the little dark man in the *capote* had to say to the giant in green frock and gilt buttons.

The first word that fell upon my ears was the name of General Harding! It was not pronounced in the ordinary way, but with an accent plainly foreign, and which I could easily tell to be Italian.

Listening a little longer, I could hear that the stranger was inquiring the direction to General Harding's residence. I should have

myself volunteered to give it him ; but from the station-master's reply I perceived that this functionary was directing him ; and just then the down train, gliding alongside, admonished me to look out for myself.

Not till then did it occur to me, that I had stupidly forgotten to take my ticket, and I hastened into the office to procure one. As I came out again upon the platform I saw the strange traveller disappear within the doorway of a hackney coach ; the driver of which, giving the whip to his horse, trundled off from the station.

In ten seconds after, I had taken my seat in the railway-carriage—an empty one—when an incident occurred that drove the queer traveller as completely out of my head as if he had never been in it.

The whistle had already screamed, and the train was about to move off, when the door was opened by the Titanic station-master, who was saying at the same time—

“ This way ladies ! ”

The rustle of silk, with some hurried exclamation outside, told of the late arrival of at least two feminine passengers; and, the moment after, they entered the carriage, and took their seats nearly opposite me.

I had been cutting open the pages of *Punch*, and did not look up into their faces as they entered. But on finishing my inspection of the cartoon, I raised my eyes to see of what style were my two travelling companions, and beheld—Belle Mainwaring and her mother!

It was just about as awkward a position as I ever remembered occupying in my life. But I managed to sustain it, by appealing once more to the pages of *Punch*. Not even so much as a nod was exchanged between us; and had there been a stranger in the carriage, he could not have told that Miss Mainwaring and I had ever met—much less danced together. I did *Punch* from beginning to end; and then, turning my attention to the advertisements on the back of the title-page, made myself acquainted with the qualities of

“Gosnell’s Soap” and the mysteries of the “Sansflectum Crinoline.” Despite these studies, I found time to give an occasional side-glance at Miss Mainwaring, which I saw she was returning by a similar slant. What she may have seen in my eye I cannot tell, but in hers I read a light that, had my heart not been of the dulness of lead, might have set it on fire. It had at one time come very near melting under that same glance; but, after the cooling process experienced, it had become hardened to the temper of steel, and now passed through the crucible unscathed. When I had finished reading *Punch’s* three columns of advertisements, and for the hundredth time made an examination of Toby, with the procession of nymphs, dancing buffoons, and bacchantes, the train stopped at Reading.

Here my travelling companions got out. So did I. I had been asked to a park fête to be held at a gentleman’s residence in the neighbourhood—the same mentioned in a previous chapter. I suspected the Mainwarings

were also bound for the place; and from the direction taken by the fly in which they drove off, I was made sure of it.

On arriving at my friend's residence I found them upon the lawn; Miss Belle, as usual, surrounded by simpering swells, among whom, not to my surprise, I recognised Mr. Nigel Harding. I noticed that, during the progress of the game of croquet which they were playing, he refrained from showing her any marked attention, leaving this for the others. For all that he was evidently uneasy, and stealthily watched her every glance and movement. Once or twice when they were apart, I could hear him say something to her in a low tone, with the green of jealousy in his eyes, and its pallor upon his lips.

On leaving the place, which the company did at an early hour, I saw that he accompanied her and her mother to the railway-station. The three rode back in the same fly. We all returned to Slough in the same train; I going on to London. From the carriage in which I

sat I could see Miss Mainwaring's pony-phaeton, with the page at the pony's head, and close by a dog-cart with a groom in the Harding livery. Before the train started I saw the ladies step into the phaeton, Nigel Harding climbing to the seat behind them, while "buttons" was dismissed to take his seat in the dog-cart. With their freight thus assorted, the two vehicles drove off, just as the train was slipping out of the station.

From what I had seen that day, and what I had heard under the great cedar tree, and, more than all, from what I knew of both parties to the suit, I had made up my mind before reaching London, that Belle Mainwaring was booked to be the better-half of Nigel Harding—if *consent* could be squeezed out of his father either by fraud or by force.

CHAPTER XXIII.

DISSIMULATION.

ON that same night, as upon almost every other of the year, General Harding was seated in his dining-room with a decanter of crusted port on his right hand, a glass a little nearer, and a Phillipine cheroot between his teeth. His maiden sister was on his left, round a corner of the table, upon which stood before her another wine-glass, with an epergne of flowers, and a hand-dish containing fruit. It was the hour after dinner, the cloth had been removed, the dessert decanters set upon the table, and the butler and footmen had retired.

"It's just nine," said the General, consulting his chronometer-watch, "Nigel should be back by this. He wasn't to stop for dinner—

only luncheon—and the train leaves Reading at 7.16. I wonder if those Mainwarings were there?"

"Pretty sure to be," replied the ancient spinster, who was shrewd at conjectures.

"Yes," thoughtfully soliloquised the General, "pretty sure, I suppose. Well, it don't much matter, I've no fear for Nigel; he's not the sort to be humbugged by her blandishments, like that hot-headed simpleton, Hal. By my word, sister! it is very strange we've not heard a word from the lad since he left us."

"You will, when he's spent the thousand pounds you gave him. When that comes to an end, he'll not be so sparing of his correspondence."

"No doubt. Strange, though—not a scrape of his pen since that nasty epistle from the inn—not even to acknowledge the receipt of the money. I suppose he got it all right. I've not looked into my bank-book since I don't know when."

"Oh, you may be certain of his having got it. If he hadn't you'd have heard from him long ago. Henry isn't one to go without money, where money can be had. You've good reason to know that. I should say you needn't trouble about him, brother; he's not been living all this time upon air."

"I wonder where he is? He said he was going abroad. I suppose he has done so."

"Doubtful enough," rejoined the spinster, with a shake of her head; "London will be the place for him, so long as his money lasts. When it is spent you'll hear from him. He'll write for a fresh supply. Of course, brother, you'll send it?"

The interrogatory was spoken ironically and in a taunting tone, intended to produce an effect the very opposite to what it might seem to serve.

"Not a shilling!" said the General, determinedly setting his wine-glass down on the table with an emphatic clink. "Not a single shilling. If within twelve months he has

succeeded in dissipating a thousand pounds, he shall go twelve years before he gets another thousand. Not a shilling before my death; and then only enough to keep him from starvation. No, Nelly dear, I've made up my mind about that. Nigel shall have all except a little something which will be left to yourself. I gave Hal every chance. He should have had half. Now, after what has happened—— There are wheels upon the gravel. Nigel with the dog-cart, I suppose."

It was; and in ten seconds more Nigel, without the dog-cart, stepped softly into the room.

"You're a little late, Nigel?"

"Yes, papa. The train was behind time."

This was a lie. The delay was caused by stoppage nearer home—at the widow Mainwaring's cottage.

"Well, I hope you have had a pleasant party?"

"Passable."

"That all? And such weather. Who was there?"

"Oh, for that matter, there was company enough—half of Bucks and Berkshire, I should think, to say nothing of a score of snobs from London."

"Any of our neighbours?"

"Well—no—not exactly."

"It's a wonder the widow Mainwaring——"

"Oh, yes, she was there. I didn't think of her."

"The daughter, of course, along with her?"

"Yes, the daughter was there, too. By the way, aunt," continued the young man, with the design of changing the subject, "you haven't asked me to join you in a glass of wine. And I'd like to have a morsel of something to eat. I feel as if I'd had nothing at all. I think I could eat a raw steak if I had it."

"There was a roast duck for dinner," suggested the aunt; "but it is cold now, dear Nigel, and so is the asparagus. Will you wait until it is warmed up, or perhaps you would

prefer a slice of the cold boiled beef, with some West Indian pickles?"

"I don't care what, so long as it's something to eat."

"Have a glass of port wine, Nigel," said the General, while his sister was directing Williams as to the arrangement of the tray. "From what you say, I suppose you don't want a nip of cognac to give you an appetite?"

"No, indeed. I've got that already. How late is it, father? Their clocks appear to be all wrong down the road, or else the trains are. It's always the way with the Great Western. It's a bad line to depend on for dining."

"Ah, and a worse for dividends," rejoined the General, the smile at his own pun being more than neutralised by a grin that told of his being holder of shares in the G. W. R.

With a laugh Nigel drank off his glass of port; and then sat down to his cold duck, boiled beef, and pickles.


CHAPTER XXIV.

A STRANGE VISITOR.

GENERAL HARDING'S butler, with the assistance of the footman, had just carried out the supper-tray when there came a ring at the hall-door bell, succeeded by a double knock. Neither were of the kind which the butler would have called "obstrepulous," but rather bashful and subdued. For all that they were heard within the room where the General sat.

"Very odd, at this hour of night," remarked the General. "Ten o'clock," he said, consulting his chronometer. "Who can it be?"

No one made a reply, as all were engrossed in listening. They heard the opening of the door, and then a parley between Williams upon the step, and somebody outside in the



porch. It lasted some time longer than need have been necessary for a visitor who was a friend of the family. The voice, too, answering the butler's, was evidently that of a stranger, and, as the occupants of the dining-room thought, one who spoke with a foreign accent.

The General bethought him, whether it might not be some of his old chums freshly arrived home from India, and who had come down *sans cérémonie* by a late train. But, then, he could think of none of them with a foreign accent.

"Who is it, Williams?" asked he, as the latter appeared in the doorway of the dining-room.

"That I can't tell, General. The gentleman, if I may so call 'im, will neither give his name nor his card. He says he has most important business, and must see you."

"Very odd! What does he look like?"

"Like a furraner, and a rum'un at that. Certain, General, he arn't a gentleman; that can be seen plain enough."

"*There* did!" again repeated the General.
 "There did! Says he *must* see me?"

"Saved it over and over, that it's important more to *own* than him. Shail I show him in, General, or will you speak to him at the door?"

"Door be it——it!" testily replied the old soldier. "I'm not going out there to accommodate a stranger without either name or card. May be some begging-letter impostor. Tell him I can't see him to-night. He may come back in the morning."

"I've told him so, General, already. He says not you *must* see him *to-night*."

"Must! The devil!"

"Well, General, if I'd be allowed to speak my opinion, he looks a good bit like that same gentleman you've mentioned."

"Who the deuce can it be, Nigel?" said the old soldier, turning to his son.

"I haven't the slightest idea myself," was Nigel's reply. "It wouldn't be that Lawyer Woolet? He answers very well to the

description Williams gives of his late intruder."

"No, no, Master Nigel, it's not Mr. Woollet. It's an article of hoomanity even uglier than him; though certain he have got something o' a lawyer's look about him. But then he be a furriner; I can swear to that."

"By Jove!" exclaimed the General, using one of his mildest asseverations. "I can't think of any foreigner that can have business with me; but whether or no, I suppose I must see him. What say you, my son?"

"Oh, as for that," answered the latter, "there can be no harm in it. I'll stay in the room with you; and if he becomes troublesome, I suppose, with the help of Williams here and the footman, we may be able to eject him."

"Lor, Master Nigel, he isn't bigger than our page-boy. I could take him up in my arms, and swing him halfway across the shrubberies. You needn't have no fear 'bout that."

"Come, come, Williams," said the General, "none of this idle talking. Tell the gentleman I'll see him. Show him in."

Then, turning to his sister, he added—

"Nelly dear, you may as well go up to the drawing-room. Nigel and I will join you as soon as we've given an interview to this unexpected guest."

The spinster, gathering up some crochet-work that she had made a commencement on, sailed out of the room—leaving her brother and nephew to receive the nocturnal caller, who would not be denied.

CHAPTER XXV.

AN UNCOURTEOUS RECEPTION.

THE old soldier and his son stood in silent expectation; for the oddity of an interview thus authoritatively demanded had summoned both to their feet. Outside they could hear the resumed exchange of speech between Williams and the stranger, and their two sets of footsteps sounding along the flagged pavement of the hall. Some seconds after, the stranger was shown inside the room, and the three were left alone—Williams retiring at a sign from the General.

A more singular specimen of the *genus homo*, or one less in keeping with the place, had never made appearance inside the dining-hall of an English country gentleman.

the 1990s, the number of people in the world who are undernourished has declined from 1.1 billion to 800 million. The number of people who are malnourished has declined from 1.5 billion to 1 billion. The number of people who are obese has increased from 100 million to 300 million. The number of people who are overweight has increased from 100 million to 300 million. The number of people who are obese and overweight has increased from 100 million to 300 million. The number of people who are obese and overweight has increased from 100 million to 300 million.

the 1990s, the number of people in the world who are under 15 years of age is expected to increase from 1.1 billion to 1.5 billion. The number of people aged 65 and over is expected to increase from 200 million to 400 million. The number of people aged 15 and over is expected to increase from 3.5 billion to 4.5 billion. The number of people aged 15 and over is expected to increase from 3.5 billion to 4.5 billion. The number of people aged 15 and over is expected to increase from 3.5 billion to 4.5 billion.

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seemed to say, "I have come here on an errand that will be its own excuse, and I know you won't send me back without giving me a satisfactory answer."

"What is it?" asked the General, as if this very thought had just passed through his own mind.

The stranger looked towards Nigel, as much as to say, "Do you wish this young gentleman to be present?"

"That is my son," continued the old soldier. "Anything you have to say need not be kept secret from him."

"You have *another* son?" asked the stranger, speaking in a foreign accent, but in English sufficiently intelligible. "I think you have another son, Signor General."

The question caused the General to start, while Nigel turned suddenly pale. The significant glance that accompanied the interrogatory told that the stranger knew something about Henry Harding.

"I have—or should have," replied the

General. "What do you want to say of him, and why do you speak of him?"

"Do you know where your other son is, Signor General?"

"Well, not exactly, at present. Do *you* know where he is? Who are you? and whence do you come?"

"Signor General, I shall be most happy to answer all three of your questions, if you only allow me to do it in the order, inverse to that in which you have put them."

"Answer them in what order you please; but do it quickly. The hour is late, and I've no time to stand here talking to an entire stranger."

"Signor General, I shall not detain you many minutes. My business is of a simple nature, and my time, like yours, is precious. First, then, I come from the city of Rome, which I need not tell you is in Italy. Second, I am *un procuratore*—an attorney you call it in English. Thirdly, and lastly, I *do* know where your other son is."

The General again started, Nigel growing paler.

“Where is he?”

“This, Signor General, will inform you.”

As he spoke, the *procuratore* drew a letter from under his *capote*, and presented it to the General. It was that which had been written by Henry Harding in the mountains, under the dictation of Corvino, the bandit chief.

Putting on his spectacles, and drawing the light nearer to him, General Harding read the letter with a feeling of astonishment, tinged with incredulity.

“This is nonsense!” said he, handing the document to Nigel. “Sheer nonsense! Read it, my son.”

Nigel did as he was desired.

“What do *you* make of it?” asked the General, addressing himself in an undertone to his son.

“That it’s just what you say, father—nonsense; or perhaps something worse. It looks to me like a trick to extort money.”

“Ah! But do you think, Nigel, that Henry has any hand in it?”

“I hardly know what to think, father,” answered Nigel, continuing the whispered conversation. “It grieves me to say what I think; but I must confess it looks against him. If he has fallen into the hands of brigands—which I cannot believe, and I hope is not true—how should they know where to send such a letter? How could they tell he has a father capable of paying such a ransom for him, unless he has put them up to it? It is probable enough that he’s in Rome, where this fellow says he has come from. That may all be. But a captive in the keeping of brigands! The thing is too preposterous!”

“Most decidedly it is. But what am I to make of this application?”

“To my mind,” pursued the insinuating councillor, “the explanation is easy enough. He’s run through his thousand pounds, as might have been expected, and he now wants more. I am sorry to believe such a thing,

father, but it looks as if this is a tale got up to work upon your feelings, and get a fresh remittance of cash. At all events, he has not stinted himself in the sum asked for."

"Five thousand pounds!" exclaimed the General, again glancing over the letter. "He must think me crazy. He shall not have as many pence—no, not if it were even true what he says about being with brigands."

"Of course that part of the story is all stuff—although it's clear he has written the letter. It's in his own hand, and that's his signature."

"Certainly it is. My God! to think that this is the first I should hear from him since that other letter. A pretty way of seeking a reconciliation with me! Bah! the trick won't take. I'm too old a soldier to be deceived by it."

"I'm sorry he should have tried it. I fear, papa, he has not yet repented of his rash disobedience. But what do you mean to do with this fellow?"

"Ay, what?" echoed the General, now remembering the man who had been the bearer of the strange missive. "What would you advise to be done? Send over for the police, and give him in charge."

"I don't know about that," answered Nigel reflectively. "It seems hardly worth while, and might lead to some unpleasantness to ourselves. Better the public should not know about the unfortunate affair of poor Henry. A police case would necessarily expose some things that you, father, I'm sure, don't wish to be made public."

"True—true. But something should be done to punish this impudent impostor. It's too bad to be so bearded—almost bullied in one's own home; and by a wretch like that."

"Threaten him, then, before dismissing him. That may bring out some more information about the scheme. At all events, it can do no harm to give him a bit of your mind. It may do good to Henry, to know how you have received his petition so cunningly contrived."

CHAPTER XXVI.

AN UNCEREMONIOUS DISMISSAL.


THE side conversation between General Harding and his son was at length suspended by the old soldier facing abruptly towards the stranger, who all the while had been standing quietly apart.

“You’re an impostor, sir!” exclaimed the General. “An impostor, I say!”

“*Molte grazie*, Signor General!” replied the man, without making other movement than a mock bow. “Rather an uncomplimentary epithet to apply to one who has come all the way from Italy to do you a service, or rather your son. Is this all the answer I’m to take back to him?”

“If you take any back to him, that’s it,” interposed Nigel. “Do you know, sir,” he continued in a threatening manner; “do you know that you’ve placed yourself within the power of our laws; that you can be arrested, and thrown into prison for an attempt to extort money under false pretences?”

“His excellence, the General, will not have me arrested. First, because there are no false pretences; and, second, that to do so would be certainly to seal your son’s doom. The moment the news should reach those who have him in their keeping, that I’ve been arrested or otherwise molested here in England, that moment will he be punished far more than you can punish *me*. You must remember that I am only a messenger, who have taken upon me the delivery of this letter. I know nothing of those who sent it, except in the way of my profession, and in the cause of humanity. I am as much your son’s messenger as theirs. I can only assure you, Signor General, that it is a serious mission; and that your son’s life



depends on my safety, and the answer you may vouchsafe to send back."

"Bah!" exclaimed the old soldier, "don't tell a cock-and-bull tale to an Englishman. I don't believe a word of it. If I did, I'd take a different way of delivering my son from such a danger. Our government would soon interfere on my behalf, and then instead of five thousand pounds, your beautiful brigands would get what they deserve, and what I wonder they haven't had long ago—six feet of rope around each of their necks."

"I fear, Signor General, you are labouring under a false delusion. Allow me to set you right on this question. Your government can be of no service to you in this affair, nor all the governments of Europe to boot. It is not the first time such threats have been used against the freebooters in question. Neither the Neapolitan Government, in whose land they live, nor that of his Holiness, upon whose territory they occasionally intrude, can coerce them, if ever so inclined. There is but one

way to obtain the release of your son—by paying the ransom demanded for him.”

“Begone, wretch!” shouted the General, losing all patience at the pleading of the *procuratore*. “Begone! out of my house! Off my premises instantly, or I shall order my servant to drag you to the horse-pond. Begone, I say!”

“And you would rue it if you did,” spitefully rejoined the little Italian, as he edged off towards the door. “*Buona notte*, Signor General! Perhaps by the morning you will have recovered your temper, and think better of my errand. If you have any message to send to your son—whom it is not very likely you will ever see again—I shall take it upon myself to transmit it for you, notwithstanding the uncourteous treatment, of which, as a gentleman, I have the right to complain. I stay at the neighbouring inn all night, and will not be gone before twelve o’clock to-morrow. *Buona notte! buona notte!*”

So saying the swarthy little stranger backed



out of the room, and, conducted by the butler, was not very courteously shown into the night.

The General stood still, his beard bristling with passion. For a time he seemed irresolute, as to whether he should have the stranger detained, and punished in some summary way. But he thought of the family scandal, and restrained himself.

"You won't write to Henry?" asked Nigel, in a tone that said, "don't."

"Not a line. If he has got into a scrape for want of money, let him get out of it again, the best way he can. As to this story about brigands——"

"Oh, that's too absurd," insinuated Nigel; "the brigands into whose hands he has fallen are the gamblers and swindlers of Rome. They have no doubt employed this lawyer, if he be one, to carry out their scheme—certainly a cunningly-contrived one, whoever originated it."

"Oh, my son! my wretched son!" exclaimed the General; "to think he has fallen

into the hands of such associates ! To think he could lend himself to a conspiracy like this, and against his own father ! Oh, God ! ”

And the old soldier uttered a groan of agony, as he sank down upon the sofa.

“ Had I not better write to him, father ? ” asked Nigel. “ Just a line to say how much his conduct is grieving you ? Perhaps a word of counsel may yet reclaim him. ”

“ If you like—if you like—though after such an experience as this I feel there is little hope of him. Ah, Lucy ! Lucy ! it is well you are not here, and that God has taken you to himself. My poor wife ! my poor wife ! this would have killed you ! ”

The apostrophe was spoken in a low, muttered tone, and after Nigel had left the room—the latter having gone out apparently with the intention of writing the letter intended to reclaim his erring brother.

It was written that night, and that night reached the hands of the strange procurator, to whom it was entrusted for delivery ; and

who, next day, true to his word, remained at the roadside inn till the hour of twelve, to receive any further communication. After midday he was seen driving off in the inn "fly" toward the Slough Station ; thence to be transported by rail and steam to his home in the Seven-hilled City.


CHAPTER XXVII.

BRIGAND DOMESTIC LIFE.

FOR several days Henry Harding was kept confined in his cell, without seeing a face, except that of the brigand who brought him his food—always the same individual.

This man was a morose wretch, and as uncommunicative as if he had been an automaton. Twice a day he would bring in the bowl of *pasta*—a sort of maccaroni porridge boiled in bacon fat, and seasoned with salt and pepper. He would place the vessel upon the floor, take away the empty one that had contained the previous meal, and then leave the captive to himself, without saying a word to him.

The repeated attempts of the young Englishman to bring him to a parley were met either



by complete inattention or rude repulse. Seeing this, they were abandoned; and the captive ate his *pasta*, and drank his cold water in silence.

Only at night was there quiet in his cell. All day long, through the slender-slit window, came noise enough. Just in front of it seemed to be the favourite loitering place of the brigands, where they passed most of their time. This was spent almost exclusively in gambling, except during intervals when quarrelling took the place of playing. Those intervals were not rare. Scarce an hour elapsed without some dispute, ending either in a fight between two individuals, or a general row, in which more than half the band appeared to take part. Then would be heard the voice of the *capo*, thundering in authoritative tones, as he delivered curses and cudgel blows right and left among the quarrellers.

Once there was a report of a pistol, followed by groans. The young Englishman believed that a summary punishment had been inflicted

on some offender: for after the groans there was an interval of solemn stillness, such as might be observed in the presence of death. If such were the dread impression upon the scoundrels it did not last long: for soon after they were heard resuming play, and the cries, "*Cinque y cinque o capo,*" and "*Vinti y vinti croce!*" the game being that common among the Italian peasantry called, "*Croce o capo,*" and which differs but little from the English "Heads or tails."

By standing on tip-toe, the prisoner could see them playing at it. The gaming-table was simply a level spot of turf in front of his cell, and nearly opposite the window. The brigands knelt or squatted in a ring: one held an old hat from which the lining had been torn out. In this were placed a number of coins, odd—usually three. These were first rattled about the hat, and then thrown down upon the turf; the hat, as a dice-box, still covering them. The bets were then made upon *capo* or *croce* (head or cross), and the

raising of the hat determined who were winners or losers.

It is in this game that the bandits find their chief source of distraction, from a life that would otherwise be unendurable, even to such ruffians as they. *Capo o croce*, with an occasional quarrel over it; plenty of *pasta*, *confetti*, fat mutton, cheeses, *roccate*, and *rosolio*; a *festa* when wine and provisions are plenty; songs usually of the most vulgar kind; now and then a dance, accompanied by some coarse flirting with the half-dozen women who usually keep company with a *banda*—these, and long hours of listless basking in the sun, compose the joys of the Italian brigand's domestic life.

When on a foray to the peopled plains, he finds excitement of an altogether different character. The surprise, the capture, the escape from pursuing soldiers, perhaps an occasional skirmish while retreating to his hill fortress—these are the incidents that occur to him on a plundering expedition: and they

are sufficiently stirring to keep his spirit from suffering *ennui*.

This last only steals upon him when the divided plunder, which is generally in the shape of *denaro di riscatta* (ransom money), has by the inexorable chances of the *capo o croce* become consolidated in a few hands—the universal result of the game.

Then does the bandit become dissatisfied with listless idleness, and commences to plan new surprises; the sack of some rich villa, or what is much more to his mind, the capture of some *galantuomo*, or gentleman, by whose ransom his purse may be again replenished, again to be staked upon “Heads or tails.”

Unseen himself, the young Englishman had an excellent opportunity of studying the life of these lawless men.

Between them and their chief there appeared to be but slight distinction. As a general rule the spoils were shared alike, as also the chances of the game; for Corvino could at any time be seen in the ring, along with

the rest, staking his *piastres* on the *capo* or *croce*.

His authority was only absolute in the administration of punishment. His kick and cudgel were never disputed; for, if they had been, it was well understood these modes of castigation would be instantly changed for a stab of his stiletto, or a shot from his pistol.

His chieftainship may have been derived from his being the originator of the band, but it was kept up and sustained by his being its bully. A chief of low courage, or less cruelty, would soon have been dispossessed, as not unfrequently happens among the *banditi*.

One thing caused Henry Harding much wonder, as, standing on tiptoe, he looked out of the little window—the women, the *bandite*.

In the band there was nearly a score of these ladies. He had at first taken them for boys—beardless members of the gang! There was but little in their dress to distinguish them from the men. They wore the same polka jacket, vest, and pantaloons, only with

a greater profusion of ornaments around their necks, and a larger number of rings upon their fingers.

Some of them were absolutely loaded with jewels of all kinds—pearls, topazes, rubies, turquoise-stones, even diamonds sparkling among the rest—the spoils drawn from the delicate fingers of many a rich *signorina*.

The hair of all was close cropped, like that of the men; while several carried poignards or pistols, so that only by a certain rotundity of form could they be distinguished from their male companions, and not all of them by this. They were not allowed to take part in the gaming, as they never got share of the *riscatta*. For all that, most of them shared in the perils of every enterprise, accompanying the men on their expeditions.

At home they laid aside the carbine to take up the needle; though they were seldom called upon to wet their fingers in the washing-tub. That is regarded as an occupation beneath the dignity of a *bandita*; and is

left to the wives of those peasants in communication with the band, and who are termed *manutangoli*, or "helpers." These are well paid for the labour of the laundry—a clean shirt costing the bandit almost the price of a new one! It was not often that any of Corvino's band cared to incur the expense; only its *damerini* or dandies, and they only upon the occasion of a *festa*.

Most of these observations were made by the English captive, during the first few days of his captivity. He saw many strange scenes through the little window of his cell. He might have seen more, had the window been lower in the wall; but, high up as it was, he was obliged to stand on tiptoe, and this becoming tiresome after a time, he only assumed the irksome attitude when some scene more exciting than common summoned him from his lair of dried fern leaves.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

UNPLEASANT INFORMATION.

SEVERAL days had elapsed without any change either in the prisoner's prospects or situation. He had come to the conclusion that his capture was no longer a farce, nor his imprisonment likely soon to terminate. The stories of brigand life he had heard told during his short sojourn in Rome, and which like others of his incredulous countrymen he had been loth to believe, were no longer doubted. He was himself a sad example of their reality, and could almost feel angry at his friend Luigi for having given him that letter of introduction, which had introduced him to such a pitiful dilemma. It was still upon his person; for, beyond robbing him of his slender purse and

other metallic movables, the brigands had left everything untouched.

By way of passing the time, he took the letter out and re-read it. One paragraph, which he had scarcely noticed before, now particularly impressed him. "I suppose my sister Lucetta will by this time be a big girl. Take good care of her till I come back, when I hope I shall be able to carry all of you out of that danger we dreaded."

When Henry Harding first read these words on his way to Rome—for the letter of introduction was an open one—he thought nothing of their signification. He supposed it could only refer to the straitened circumstances of his family which the young artist expected at some time to relieve, by the proceeds of his successful pencil. Besides, Belle Mainwaring was too much in his mind to leave room for more than a passing thought of anything else, even for the little sister of Luigi, big as she might be at the writing of the letter—since still unknown.

Now, however, reflecting in his lone cell, with the image of that fair face first seen on the day of his captivity, and since constantly recurring to his thoughts, he began to shape out a different interpretation to the ambiguous phrase. What if the danger spoken of was less of poverty than peril—such, in short, as appeared to threaten that young girl, the daughter of the village *sindico*? To reflect even upon this gave the captive pain. How much more would he have been pained to think that the sister of his dear friend, Luigi Torrecani was in like peril.

Sunset, declaring itself by the increasing gloom of his cell, caused him to refold the letter, and return it to his pocket. He was still pondering upon its contents, when voices outside the window attracted his attention. He listened—anything to vary the monotony of his prison life—even the idle talk of a brace of bandits; for it was two of these who were speaking outside. In less than ten seconds after he was listening with all his ears; for in

the midst of their conversation he fancied he heard a name that was known to him.

He had just been thinking of Luigi Torreani. This was not the name that passed from the lips of the bandit; but one of like signification—Lucetta. He knew it was the name of Luigi's sister, of which he had just been reminded by the letter.

Henry Harding had often heard his friend speak of this sister—his only one. It was not strange, therefore, he should listen with quickened attention; and so did he, grasping the solitary bar of his window, and placing his ear close up to the sill. True there might be scores of Lucettas in that part of the country; but, for all this, he could not help listening with eager interest.

"She'll be our next *riscatta*," said the brigand who had pronounced the name; "you may make up your mind to that."

"*E por che?*" inquired the other. "The old *sindico*, with all his proud name and his syndicate to boot, hasn't enough to pay ransom

“What would be the subject of such a picture?”

“About all that concerns the room, the bed, and I know a deal the girl has taken the liberty. I saw it as we passed through the door the other night. I believe he’d have then turned her off only for fear of Pigeon. She’s a she-devil, & the summer suit, though generally she takes kindly to her kicks and cuttings, she wouldn’t if there was a woman in the case. Don’t you remember when we had the dancing-house down in the valley of Malt? What a row there was between our captain and his *own* room?”

“I remember. What was it all about? I never heard?”

“About a bit of kissing. Our *capo* was inclined upon a girl; that coquettish little devil, the daughter of the old charcoal-burner Poli. The girl seemed kindly. He had slipped a charm round her neck, and I believe had kissed her. Whether he did that or no, I won’t be certain; but the charm was seen and recog-

nised by the signora. She plucked it from the girl's neck; as she did so almost dragging her off her feet. Then came the scene with the *capo*."

"She drew a stiletto upon him, did she not?"

"Ay, and would have used it, too, if he had not made some excuse, and turned the thing into a laugh. That pacified her. What a fury she was while the fit was on her. *Cospetto!* Her eyes glittered like hot lava from Vesuvius."

"The girl stole away, I think?"

"That did she, and a good thing for her she did; though if she had stayed I don't think Corvino would have dared look at her again that night. I never saw him cowed before. He lost both his sweetheart and his gold charm; for his Cara Popetta appropriated that to herself, and wears it regularly whenever he holds festa among the peasant girls, by way of reminder, I suppose."

"Did the captain ever see Poli's daughter again?"

"Well, some of us think he did. But you

remember, after you left us we moved away from that part of the country? The soldiers became too troublesome about there, and there was a whisper that the signora had something to do with making the place too hot for us. After all, I don't think Corvino cared for the *carbonero's* daughter. It was only a short-lived fancy, because the girl showed sweet upon him. This of the sindaco's chicken is a very different affair; for I know he's fond of going in that direction, and shouldn't wonder if we get into danger by it. Danger or no danger, he'll have her sooner or later, take my word for it."

"I don't wonder at his fancy; she a sweet-looking girl. One likes her all the better for being so proud upon it."

"Her pride will have a fall, once Corvino gets her in his clutches. He's just the man to tame such shy damsels as she."

"*Povera!* it is a pity, too."

"Bah, you're a fool, Thomasso. Your sojourn in the Pope's prison has spoilt you for

our life, I fear. What are we poor fellows to do, if we don't have a sweetheart now and then? Chased liked wolves, why shouldn't we take a slice of lamb when we can get it? Who can blame the *capo* for liking a little bit of tender chick? And such a sweet bit as Lucetta Torreani."

Henry Harding, who had been all this time listening with disgust to the dialogue between the two brigands, felt as if a huge stone had struck him. The presentment that had just commenced shaping itself in his mind appeared all at once to be circumstantially confirmed. The young girl spoken of was Lucetta Torreani. It could be no other than the sister of Luigi, whom he had seen standing in the balcony at Val di Orno, and who so often since had been occupying his thoughts.

It was a singular collocation or coincidence of circumstances, and painful as singular. Under the blow, he relaxed his hold of the bar, and staggering back, sank down upon the floor of his cell.

CHAPTER XXIX.

PAINFUL CONJECTURING.

FOR some time the young Englishman sat, where he had sunk down, in a state of mind not far removed from bewilderment. His captivity, if irksome before, was now changed to torture. Of his own misfortunes he no longer thought, nor cared. His soul was absorbed in contemplating the perils that beset the sister of his friend—that fair young girl—that although seen but for a moment, and then looked upon in the light of a stranger, had made such an impression upon his heart ; and, even without knowing that she was Luigi's sister, what he had just heard was of itself sufficient to make him unhappy in her behalf. He knew the terrible power exercised

by these bandits. He had proofs of it in his own experience. A power all the more dangerous, since to men with lives already forfeit, there can be no restraint arising from fear of the law. One crime more could not further compromise them ; and to commit such crime there needed only the motive and opportunity. In this case both appeared to be present. He had himself seen something of the first, in the behaviour of the brigands on the night of their bivouac in the village. Perhaps he might have seen more, but for the presence of Popetta, who in their late maraud had made one of the band. What he had now listened to placed the thing beyond doubt. The eyes of Corvino had turned longingly on the sister of Luigi Torreani. What must be the sequel when the wolf thus looks upon the lamb ? Only destruction !

About the opportunity there was not much left to conjecture. It appeared like a sheep-fold without either watch-dog or shepherd. The behaviour of the bandits, while occupying

the town, told that they could re-occupy it at any moment they had the mind. They might not be allowed long to remain there; but the shortest flying visit would be sufficient for a purpose like that. Such *razzia* and rapine were but the ordinary incidents of their life, the tactics of their calling, and they were accustomed to execute them with the most subtle skill and celerity. Corvino and his band could at any moment carry off Lucetta Torreani with half the damsels of Val di Orno—the captive artist now knew this to be the name of the village—without danger of either resistance or interruption. After such an outrage they *might* be pursued by the Papal gendarmes or soldiery, and they might not. That would depend upon circumstances—or whether the *mauntengoli* willed it. There would be a show of pursuit, perhaps; and perhaps with this it would end.

In his own land the young Englishman would not have given credit to such a state of things. He could not, nor would his country-

men until a late period, when it was brought home to them by testimony too substantial to be discredited. Besides, since his arrival in Rome he had become better informed about the status of Italian social life and the behaviour of these banditti. He had no doubt, therefore, about the danger in which stood the sister of Luigi Torreani. There seemed but one who could save her from the fearful fate that hung over her head, and that one a woman—if this word can be used in speaking of such a creature as Cara Popetta.

To the brigand's wife, companion, or whatever she was, the thoughts of the captive turned as he sat reflecting, and devising schemes for the protection of Lucetta Torreani. If he were only free himself, knowing what he now did, the thing might have been easy enough, without appealing to such a protector. But his freedom was now out of the question. He felt convinced that from that prison he would never go forth, but to be carried to one equally secure—until the messenger should

return from England bearing the ransom for which he had written. And now, for the first time, did he feel satisfied at having written as he had done. Had he known what he now knew, it would have needed no dictation of the bandit chief to strengthen that appeal to his father. He earnestly hoped that the appeal he had made would receive a favourable response, and the money arrive in time to make liberty worth regaining. He had fixed upon the purpose to which he would devote it.

What if it came not at all? There was too much probability in this. Formerly he had felt reckless, from the curse that had been resting upon him ; that is, the remembrance of Belle Mainwaring, and the disinheritance he had deemed so cruel. And there was the still later act of paternal harshness, in his father's refusal to advance the inconsiderable legacy he had promised to leave him. In like manner his father might refuse to pay the ransom demanded by the brigands.

All that night the captive remained in his

cell without sleep. Now and then he paced the fern-covered floor, by the movement hoping to stimulate his thoughts into the conception of some plan that would ensure, less his own safety than that of Lucetta Torreani. But daylight glimmered through the little window, and he was still without any feasible scheme. He had only the slender hope, that the ransom might arrive in time; this and the equally slender expectation of assistance from "Cara Popetta."

CHAPTER XXX.

BRIGANDAGE AND ITS CAUSE.

BRIGANDAGE, as it exists in the southern countries of Europe, is only beginning to receive its full measure of credence. There was always a knowledge, or supposition, that there were robbers in Spain, Italy, and Greece, who went in bands, and now and then attacked travellers, plundering them of their purses, and occasionally committing outrages on their persons. People, however, supposed these cases to be exceptional, and that the stage representations of brigand life to which in Transpontine theatres we are treated, were exaggerations, both as regards the power and picturesqueness of these banded outlaws. There were banditti, of

course, conceded every one ; but these were few and far between, confined to the fastnesses of the mountains, or concealed in some pathless forest—only showing themselves by stealth and on rare occasions upon the public highways, or in the inhabited districts of the country.

Unhappily, this view of the case is not the correct one. At present, and for a long time past, the brigands of Italy, so far from skulking in mountain caves or forest lairs, openly disport themselves in the plains, even where thickly peopled ; not unfrequently making themselves masters of a village, and retaining possession of it for days at a time. You may wonder at the weakness of the Italian governments, that permit such a state of things to exist. But it does exist, sometimes in spite of the governments, but sometimes also with their secret support and connivance—notably in the territories of Rome and Naples. To explain why they connive at it would be to enter upon a religio-political question which

we do not care to discuss—since it might be deemed out of place in the pages of a mere romantic tale.

The motive of these governments for permitting brigandage was similar to that which elsewhere gives “comfort and support” to many an association almost as despicable as brigandage. It is the old story of despotism all over the world, *Divide et impera*; and prince or priest, if they cannot govern a people otherwise, will even rule them through the scourge of the robber:

Were there two forms of religion in Italy, as in Ireland, there would be no brigands. Then there would be no need of them: since in aspiring to political liberty the two parties would satisfactorily checkmate one another, as they have done and still do in Ireland—each preferring serfdom for itself rather than to share freedom with its hated rival.

Since in Italy there is but one religion, some other means was required to check and counteract the political liberty of the people.

Despotism had hit upon the device of brigandage, and this is the explanation of its existence.

The nature of this hideous social sore is but imperfectly understood outside Italy. It might be supposed an irksome state of existence to dwell in a country where robbers can ramble about at will, and do pretty much as they please. And so it would be to any one of sensitive mind or educated intelligence; but where the bandits dwell, there are few of this class, the districts infected with them having been long since surrendered to small tenant-farmers and peasantry. A landed proprietor does not think of residing on his own estate. If he did, he would be in danger every day of his life—not of being assassinated, for that would be a simple act of folly on the part of the brigands—but hurried away from his home to some rendezvous in the mountains, and there held captive till his friends could raise a ransom sufficient to satisfy the cupidity of his captors. This refused—supposing it possible

of being obtained—then he would certainly be assassinated—hanged or shot—without further hesitancy or equivocation.

Knowing this, from either his own or his neighbour's experience, the owner of an Italian estate takes the precaution to reside in the towns, where there is a garrison of regular soldiers, or some other form of protection for his person. And only *inside* such a town is he safe. A single mile beyond the boundary of their suburbs, sometimes even within them, he runs the risk of getting picked up and carried off, before the very faces of his friends and fellow-citizens. To deny this would be to contradict facts of continual occurrence. Scores of such instances are annually reported, both in the Roman States and in the late Neapolitan territory—now happily included in a safer and better *régime*, though still suffering from this chronic curse.

But it may be asked of the peasantry themselves—the small farmers, shopkeepers, artificers, labourers, shepherds, and the like—

how they live under such an abnormal condition of things?

That is what the world wonders at, more especially the public of England; which is not very intelligent on any foreign matter, and dull at comprehending even that which concerns itself. Have we ever heard of one of our own farmers raising his voice against a war, however cruel or unjust, against the people of another country, provided it increased the price of bacon in his own? And in this we have the explanation why the peasant people of Italy bear up so bravely against brigandage. When a village baker gets a *pezzo* (in value something more than a dollar) for a loaf of bread weighing less than three pounds, the real price in the nearest town being only threepence; when a labourer gets a similar sum for his brown bannock of like weight; when his wife has another *pezzo* for washing a brigand's shirt—the brigandesses being above such work; when the shepherd asks and obtains a triple price for his goat,

kid, or sheep ; and when every other article of bandit clothing or consumption is paid for at a proportionate famine rate, one need no longer be astonished at the tolerance of the Italian peasantry towards such generous customers.

But how about the insults, the annoyances, the dangers to which they are subject at the hands of these outlaws ?

All nonsense. They are not in any danger. They have little to lose, but their lives ; and these the brigands do not care to take. It would be to kill the goose, and get no more eggs. In the way of annoyances the English labourer has to submit to quite as many, if not more, in the shape of heavy taxation, or the interference of a prying policeman ; and when it comes to the question of insult, supposing it to be offered to a wife or pretty daughter, the Italian peasant is in this respect not much worse off than the tradesman of many an English town annually abandoned to the tender mercies of a maudlin militia.

Brigandage, therefore, in the belief of the

Italian peasant, is not, at all times, so very unendurable.

Notwithstanding, there are occasions when it is so, and people suffer from it grievously. Scenes of cruelty are often witnessed—episodes and incidents absolutely agonizing. These usually occur in places that have either hitherto escaped the curse of brigandage, or have been for a long time relieved from it; where owners of estates, deeming themselves safe, have ventured to reside on their properties, in hopes of realising an income—more than a moiety of which, under the robber *régime*, goes into the pockets of their tenantry, the peasant cultivators. And to prevent this residence of the proprietors on their estates is the very thing desired by their proletarian retainers, who benefit by their absence—this begetting another motive, perhaps the strongest of all, for the toleration of the bandits.

When, in districts for a time abandoned by them, the brigands once more make appearance, either on a running raid or for perma-

nent occupation, then scenes are enacted that are truly deplorable. Owners for a time remain, either hating to break up their households, or unable to dispose of the property in hand, such as stock or chattels, without ruinous sacrifice. They live on, trusting to chance, sometimes to favour, and not unfrequently to a periodical bleeding by black mail, that gains them the simple indulgence of non-molestation. It is at best but a precarious position, painful as uncertain.

In just such a dilemma was the father of Luigi Torreani, *sindico*, or chief magistrate, of the town in which he dwelt, owning considerable property in the district. Up to a late period he had felt secure from the incursions of the bandits. He had even gone so far as to gain ill-will from these outlaws, by the prosecution of two of their number at a time when there was some safety in the just administration of the laws. But times had changed. The Pope, occupied with his heretical enemies outside his sacred dominions, gave little

heed to interior disturbances ; and as for Cardinal Antonelli, what cared he for complaints of brigand outrages daily poured into his ears ? Rather had he reason for encouraging them—this true descendant of the Cæsars and type of the Cæsar Borgias.

It was to this peril in which his father was placed that the paragraph in Luigi's letter referred. Henry Harding, reflecting within his prison cell, had hit upon its correct interpretation.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE TORREANIS.

ON that same night in which the brigands had strayed into the town of Val di Orno, the *sindico* had learned something which caused him more than ever to fear for the future. The bold, bullying behaviour of the men was itself sufficient to tell him of his own impotence, in case they had chosen to violate the laws of hospitality. But he had been told of something more, something personal to himself, or rather to his family—that family consisting solely of his daughter Lucetta. She and Luigi were his only children, and they had been motherless for many years.

What he had learned is already known to the reader—that Corvino had been seen to

cast longing looks upon his child. This is the Italian parlance when speaking of a preference of the kind supposed to exist in the bosom of a brigand. Francesco Torreani knew its significance. He was well aware of the personal attractions possessed by his daughter. Her great beauty had long been the theme, not only of the village of Val di Orno, but of the surrounding country. Even in the city itself had she been spoken of; and once, while on a visit there with her father, she had been beset by blandishments in which counts and cardinals had taken part; for these red-legged gentry of the Church are not callous to the smiles of witching woman.

It was the second time Corvino had seen Lucetta Torreani; and her father was admonished that he had perhaps seen her twice too often, as that once more he might bring misery to his house, leaving it with a desolate hearth. There was no insinuation against the girl—no hint that she had in any way encouraged the bold advances of the brigand chief.

On the contrary, it was known that she hated the sight of him, as she should do. It had been simply a warning, whispered in the father's ear, that it would be well for her to be kept out of Corvino's way. But how was this to be done ?

On the day after the visit of the band, Francesco Torreani noticed something strange in his daughter's manner. There was an air of dejection not usual to her, for the pretty Lucetta was not given to gravity. Why should she be low-spirited at such a crisis ? Her father inquired the cause.

"You are not yourself to-day, my child," he said, observing her dejected air.

"I am not, papa ; I confess it."

"Has anything occurred to vex you ?"

"To vex *me* ! No, not quite that. It is thinking of another that gives me unhappiness."

"Of another ! Who, *cara figlia* ?"

"Well, papa, I've been thinking of that poor young *Inglese*, who was carried away

by those infamous men. Suppose it had been brother Luigi?"

"Ay, indeed!"

"What do you think they will do with him? Is his life in danger?"

"No, not his life—that is, if his friends will only send the money that will be demanded for his ransom."

"But if he have no friends? He might not. His dress was not rich; and yet for all that he looked a *galantuomo*. Did he not?"

"I did not take much notice of him, my child. I was too busy with the affairs of the town while the ruffians were here."

"Do you know, papa, what our girl Annetta has heard? Some one told her this morning."

"What?"

"That the young *Inglese* is an artist, just like our Luigi. How strange if it be so?"

"'Tis probable enough. Many of these English residents in Rome are artists by profession. They come here to study our old

paintings and sculptures. He *may* be one, and very likely is. 'Tis a pity, poor fellow, but it can't be helped. Perhaps if he were a great *milord* it would be all the worse for him. His captors would require a much larger sum for his ransom. If they find he can't pay, they'll be likely to let him go."

"I do hope they will; I do indeed."

"But why, child? Why are you so much interested in this young man? There have been others. Corvino's band took three with them, the last time they passed through. You said nothing about them."

"I did not notice them, papa: and he—think of his being a *pittore*! Suppose brother Luigi was treated so in his country?"

"There is no danger of that. I wish we had such a country to live in; under a government where everything is secure, life, property, and——"

The *sindico* did not say what besides. He was thinking of the admonition he had recently received.

"And why should we not go to England?"

Go there and live with Luigi. He said in his last letter, he has been successful in his profession, and would like to have us with him. Perhaps this young *Inglese* on his return may stop at the inn; and, if you would question him, he could tell us all about his country. If it be true what you say of it, why should we not go there to live?"

"There, or somewhere else. Italy is no longer a home for us. The Holy Pontiff is too much occupied with his foreign affairs to find time for the protection of his people. Yes, *cara figlia*, I've been thinking of leaving Val di Orno—this day more than ever. I've almost made up my mind to accept the offer Signor Bardoni has made for my estate. It's far below its value; but in these times—what's all that noise in the street?"

Lucetta ran to the window, and looked out.

"*Che vedette?*" inquired her father.

"Soldiers," she replied. "There's a great long string of them coming up the street. I suppose they're after the brigands?"

"Yes. They won't catch them for all that.

They never do. They're always just in time to be too late! Come away from the window, child. I must go down to receive them. They'll want quartering for the night, and plenty to eat and drink. What's more, they won't want to pay for it. No wonder our people prefer extending their hospitality to the brigands, who pay well for everything. Ah, me! it's no sinecure to be the *sindico* of such a town. If old Bardoni wishes it, he can have both my property and place. No doubt he can manage better than I. He's better fitted to deal with banditti."

Saying this, the *sindico* took up his official staff; and, putting on his hat, descended to the street, to give official reception to the soldiers of the Pope.

"A grand officer!" said Lucetta, glancing slyly through the window-bars. "If he were only brave enough to go after those brutes of brigands, and rescue that handsome young *Inglese*. Ah! if he'd only do that. I'd give him a smile for his pains. *Povero pittore!*

Just like brother Luigi. I wonder now if he has a sister thinking of him. Perhaps he may have a—— ”

The girl hesitated to pronounce the word “sweetheart,” though, as the thought suggested itself, there came a slight shadow over her countenance, as if she would have preferred knowing he had none.

“Oh !” she exclaimed, once more looking out of the window. “The grand officer is coming home with papa ; and there’s another—a younger one—with him. No doubt they will dine here ; and I suppose I must go and dress to receive them.”

Saying this, she glided out of the room ; which was soon after occupied by the *sindico*, and his two soldier-guests.

CHAPTER XXXII.

CAPTAIN COUNT GUARDIOLI.

THE town of Val di Orno was now in military possession, and there was no longer any fear of a revisit from the bandits.

The soldiers, in all about a hundred, were distributed by billet into the best houses while the officers took possession of the inn.

The captain, however, not contented with such shelter as the humble hostelry afforded contrived to insinuate himself into more comfortable quarters, in the house of the chief magistrate of the town, who, as already known was the *sindico* himself.

It was a hospitality somewhat reluctantly offered ; and, under other circumstances, th

offer might not have been made. But the times were troublous, the brigands were "abroad," and people could not well act with churlishness towards their professed protectors.

Besides, Francesco Torreani, on his own account, had need to show courtesy, or pretend it, to the soldiers of the Pope. It was suspected that he sympathised with that party of liberal views, fast growing in influence, and who, under the inspiration of Mazzini, was threatening an Italian republic.

Compromised by this suspicion, the *sindico* of Val di Orno required to act with circumspection in the presence of the Pope's officer.

The proposal for quarters in his house had come from the latter. It was made deferentially, and under some trifling excuse, but in a way to make refusal a delicate and difficult matter. The *sindico* was constrained to give consent; and the officer brought his luggage, along with his body servant, from the inn, leaving more room for his subalterns.

The *sindico* thought it strange, but said

nothing. The explanation he gave to himself was not very consolatory. "To act as a spy upon me, I suppose. No doubt he has his orders from Antonelli."

Though plausible to him who made it, the conjecture was not true. Captain Count Guardioli had received no orders of the kind; though, likely enough, he had given the Vatican some hints of the political proclivities of the *sindico* of Val di Orno.

His desire to share the hospitality of the magistrate's mansion was a thought that came, after his entering the house on that first merely official visit. The cause was simple enough. He had caught sight of the *sindico's* fair daughter as she was crossing one of the corridors, and Captain Count Guardioli was not the man to close his eyes against such attractions as Lucetta possessed.

Poor girl! To be assailed on every side—on one by a *capo* of bandits, on the other a captain of Papal soldiers. In truth, was she in danger? Fortunately for her peace of

mind, she knew nothing of the designs of Coryino; though she was not long in discovering the inclinations of Captain Count Guardioli.

His countship was one of those men who believe themselves irresistible—a true Italian lady-killer, with a semi-piratical aspect, eyes filled with intellectual fire, teeth of snowy whiteness, and coal-black moustaches, turning spirally along his cheeks. A maiden must have her mind powerfully preoccupied who could withstand his amorous assaults. So was he accustomed to declare in the ears of his military associates—boasting his irresistibility.

No doubt, in the corrupt circles of the Apostolic city, he had had his successes. Count, captain, and cavalier, above all, an ardent pursuer of love adventures, it could scarce be otherwise.

At first sight of Lucetta Torreani the Captain Count experienced a sensation akin to ecstasy. It was like one who has discovered a treasure, hitherto unseen by the eyes of

man. What a triumph there would be in revealing it! To obtain it could be no great difficulty. A village damsel, a simple country girl, she would not be likely to resist the fascinations of one who brought along with him the accomplishments of the court, backed by the prestige of title and position.

So reasoned Captain Count Guardioli; and, from that moment, commenced to lay siege to the heart of Lucetta Torreani. But, although from the city of Cæsars, he could not say, as the first Cæsar had done, "*Veni—vidi—vici!*" he came, and saw; but, after residing a week under the same roof with the "simple village damsel," he was so far from having subdued her heart, that he had not made the slightest impression upon it; on the contrary, he had himself become enslaved by her charms. He had grown so enamoured of the beautiful Lucetta, that his passion was apparent to every one in the place, his own soldiers and subalterns included.

Blinded by his ill-starred idolatry, he had

abandoned even the dignity of concealing it; and followed his *ignis fatuus* about—constantly forcing his company upon her in a manner that rendered him ridiculous.

All this the father saw with chagrin, but could not help it. He consoled himself, however, with the reflection that Lucetta was safe, so far as her heart was concerned. And yet every one did not believe this. In the character of the *sindico's* daughter there was nothing that could be called coquetry. It was rather an amiability, that hesitated about giving pain; and, influenced by this, she listened to the solicitations and flatteries of the Captain Count almost as if she relished them. It was only her father who thought otherwise. Perhaps he might be mistaken.

As usual, the soldiers did but little service—none at all that was of any avail towards clearing the country of the bandits. They made occasional excursions to the neighbouring valleys, where the outlaws had been heard of, but where they could never be found.

In these expeditions they were never accompanied by their *commandante*. He could not tear himself away from the side of Lucetta Torreani, and the field duty was left to his lieutenants. By night the soldiers strayed about the town, got drunk in the liquor-shops, insulted the townsmen, took liberties with their women, and made themselves so generally disagreeable, that before a week had elapsed, the citizens of Val di Orno would have gladly exchanged their military guests for Corvino and his cut-throats.

About ten days after their entry into the place, there came a report, which by the townspeople was received with secret satisfaction, not the less from their having heard a whisper as to the cause. The soldiers were to be recalled to Rome, to protect the Holy See from the approaches of the Republic.

Even to that secluded spot had rumours reached, that a change was coming, and there were men in Val di Orno—where it might be supposed such an idea could scarce have

penetrated—men ready to vociferate, “*Eviva la Repubblica!*”. Its *sindico* would have been among the foremost to have raised this regenerating cry.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

IMPROVED PRISON FARE.

A WEEK elapsed from the day the brigands had got back to their mountain den. The plunder had all been appropriated by three or four, to whom fortune had been most favourable. These were already the richest individuals in the band; for amid the mountains of Italy, as in the towns of Homburg and Baden, the banker in the end is sure to sweep in the stakes of the outsiders. Dame Fortune may give luck for a run; but he who can afford to lose longest will outrun her in the end.

Among the winners was the brigand chief, and Cara Popetta put fresh rings upon her

fingers, new brooches upon her breast, and additional chains around her neck.

Another expedition began to be talked about, to provide fresh stakes for the game of *capo* or *croce*. It was not to be either a grand or distant one—only a little spurt into one of the neighbouring valleys—the capture, if chance allowed it, of some petty proprietor, who might have ventured from the great city to have a look at his estates, or the seizure of such chattels as might be found in a country village. It was chiefly intended to fill up the time, until the return of that secret messenger who had been despatched to England, and from whose mission much was expected.

Their English *confrère* had given the brigands a hint of the great wealth of their captive's father, and all were hopeful of receiving the grand ransom that had been demanded by the *capo*. With five thousand pounds (nearly thirty thousand *pezzos*), they might play for a month, and go to sleep for

another, without troubling themselves about the soldiers in pursuit.

The little expedition, that was to form the interlude while this was being waited for, was soon organised—only about three-fourths of the band being permitted to take part in it. On this occasion the women were also left behind, Cara Popetta among the rest.

The captive, inside his cell, only knew of its having started by the greater tranquillity that reigned around the place. There were still quarrels occurring at short intervals; but these appeared to be between the women, whose voices, less sonorous, were not less energetic in their accents of anger, or more refined in their mode of expressing it. Like their short-cropped hair, their vocabulary appeared to have been shorn of all its elegance—both, perhaps, having been parted with at the same time. Had Henry Harding been in a mind for amusement, he might have found it in witnessing their disputes, that oft occurred right under his window. But he was not. On

the contrary, it but disgusted him to think of the degradation to which the angel woman may reach, when once she has strayed from the path of virtue.

And many of these women were beautiful, or had been before they became vicious. No doubt more than one had been the fond hope of some doting parent, perhaps the stay of an aged mother, and the solace of her declining days, and who, having one day strayed beyond the confines of her native village, like the daughter of Pietro, returned "home sad and slow," or never returned at all!

The heart of the young Englishman was lacerated as he reflected upon their fate. It was torture, when he thought of them in connection with Lucetta Torreani. To think of that pure, innocent girl—the glance he had had of her convinced him that she was this—becoming as one of those feminine fiends who daily jarred and warred outside his window! Surely it could never be. And yet what was there to hinder it? This was the inquiry that

now occupied his attention, and filled him with dread forebodings.

Since the departure of the expedition a ray of hope had shone into his cell. It was bright as the sunbeam that there entered. For the mind of the captive, quickened by captivity, like a drowning man, will catch even at straws; and one seemed to offer itself to the imprisoned artist.

In the first place, he perceived that there was a chance of corrupting his gaoler. This was no longer the morose, taciturn fellow, who had hitherto attended upon him, but one who, if not cheerful, was at least talkative. On hearing his voice the prisoner could at once recognise it as that of one of the brigands who had held conversation under his window. It was the one whose sentiments showed him the less hardened of the two, and whom the other had called Tommaso. The captive fancied something might be done with this man. From what he had heard him say, Tommaso did not appear altogether dead to the dictates

of humanity. True, he had made confession to having spent some time in a Papal prison. But many a martyr had done that—political and otherwise. The worst against him was his being where he now was; but this might have come from a like cause.

So reflected Henry Harding; and the more did he think of it, after his new gaoler had held converse with him. But he had found something else to reflect upon, also of a hopeful character. The breakfast brought by Tommaso—which was his first meal after the departure of the band—was altogether different from those of former days. Instead of the *maccheroni pasta*, often unseasoned and insipid, there were broiled mutton, sausages, *confetti*, and a bottle of *rosolio*!

“Who sent these delicacies?” was the interrogatory of him who received them. He did not put it until after eating his dinner, which in a like way differed from the dinners of previous days. Then he asked the question of his new attendant.

"*La signora*," was the answer of Tommaso, speaking in such a courteous tone, that but for the small chamber and the absence of furniture the captive might have fancied himself in an hotel, and especially cared for by one of its waiters.

Throughout the day did this solicitude show itself; and at night the signora herself brought him his supper, without either the intervention or attendance of Tommaso. Shortly after the sun had gone down the young Englishman started at seeing a woman make her way inside his cell; for it was an apparition strange as unexpected.

The small chamber in which he was imprisoned was but the adjunct of a larger apartment—a sort of storeroom, where the brigands kept the bulkier articles of their plunder, as also provisions. In this last was a large window, through which the moon was shining; and it was only on the door of his cell being thrown open that he perceived his feminine visitor. Though she was but dimly seen in the

borrowed light of the outer chamber, he could tell that it was a woman.

Who was she?

Only for a second was he in doubt; her large form, as she stood outlined in the doorway, as also the drapery of her dress, told him it was the wife of the chief. He had observed that only she, of all the women belonging to the band, affected female habiliments.

Yes, his visitor was Cara Popetta. He wondered what she could want with him; all the more as she came stealing in apparently in fear of being watched, or followed by some one outside. She had noiselessly opened the outer door, as noiselessly closed it behind her, and in the same way opened and closed that communicating with his cell.

END OF VOL. I.

